

Three great activist role models

. . . that the far left and new right would like you to forget

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Who says we don't have worthy role models anymore? If you're a radical middle activist -- or just a decent, caring person -- then you've got to get hold of three recent memoirs:

- Betty Friedan, [Life So Far: A Memoir](#) (Simon & Schuster, 2000);
- John Lewis, [Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement](#) (Simon & Schuster, 1998, academic ed. 2001); and
- Amitai Etzioni, [My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

They'll inspire you, enthrall you, and help you understand why the emerging "radical middle" political perspective (which all three memoirists contributed to) offers us our best shot at a decent future.

A common pattern

All three memoirs give us grand sweeping overviews of their principals -- in that sense they're more like autobiographies (covering a person's entire life) than memoirs (covering one aspect of a person's life). But there's nothing meandering about these books, and -- significantly -- the pattern of each memoirist's political life is exactly the same:

Betty Friedan was a founder of the [modern women's movement](#) -- author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), arguably one of the most influential books of the 20th century, and co-founder of three key feminist organizations, National Organization for Women, NARAL, and the National Women's Political Caucus.

She failed to see eye-to-eye with radical feminist activists like Gloria Steinem, Robin Morgan, and Germaine Greer -- one reason she was ultimately shoved out of all three of the organizations she helped create, run, and raise money for. But that didn't keep her from fighting for her pragmatic but visionary values forevermore. Even in her 70s she wrote a bestselling book attempting to give old people the same sense of purpose and worth she'd given to women, *The Fountain of Age* (1993).

John Lewis was a leader of the [civil rights movement of the 1960s](#) -- co-founder of the pioneering Nashville Student Sit-in Movement, fiery speaker at the 1963 March on Washington, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during its most effective years of integrating public facilities and registering voters in the Deep South (1963-66).

He failed to see eye-to-eye with radical SNCC activists like Stokely Carmichael, James Forman, and Marion Barry -- one reason he was literally “de-elected” as chairman in a midnight palace coup. But 20 years later he got the last laugh. He scored a stunning upset in a race for an Atlanta Congressional seat against Julian Bond, one of SNCC’s old radical faves; and he’s still in Congress today.

Amitai Etzioni was one of the first prominent U.S. academics to take a public stand against the war in Vietnam. He later co-founded and wrote the principal text for the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE), still the leading academic organization trying to integrate sociology, psychology, and the humanities with economics.

But he failed to see eye-to-eye with many of the radicals who flocked to SASE. In the 1990s he launched and became the tireless chief promoter of the [communitarian movement](#), which says we need to temper individual rights with responsibilities to others (e.g., no loitering by drug dealers). He also wrote that movement’s key texts, *The Spirit of Community* (1993) and *The New Golden Rule* (1996).

Radical middle from the start

Obviously, all three memoirists were inspired to develop their unique political philosophies in part because of opposition from the political left.

But all three were also motivated by positive, both/and, us-*and*-them, radical middle passions from the start.

For example: From the beginning, Friedan wanted women to develop ways of “transcending the either-or, motherhood vs. career split.” Unlike the radicals, she did *not* want women to necessarily come down on the side of careerism, lesbianism, separatism, whatever. Also, she never saw women as an oppressed group seizing power from their oppressors -- men. She totally rejected that sort of rhetoric and analysis.

Which is not to say she was some sort of squishy liberal. She saw second wave feminism as, in her words, “a revolutionary and unique new concept -- a women’s movement for equality in truly equal partnership with men.”

Throughout his memoir, John Lewis is lamenting “the lack of listening going on in America.” And in responding to the radical multiculturalists of our era he sounds exactly as he did in SNCC:

We must not turn away from one another. We must not retreat into separate tribes of like-minded, like-looking people. . . . This is the way of exclusion, not inclusion. We cannot afford to keep going this way.

As for Etzioni, he spent his whole adult life trying to be “both a true academic and publicly active.” (And he succeeded -- two of his many books are among the most significant works of *academic* sociology since World War II.) His current goal, radical

middle to the core, has changed little since he was participating in vaguely countercultural teach-ins in the 1960s:

[T]o change the moral culture of America by involving the people in a dialogue about America's core values, to convince Americans to spend more time with their children, and -- once they had a decent standard of living -- to refrain from frantically pursuing ever more consumer goods.

Activists' to-do list

Let's say we want to learn from these people . . . not to become just like them (they're by no means perfect, as you'll see), but to become powerful and effective radical middle activists, as they were and are.

Do their memoirs contain any lessons, any clues?

They sure do. In the course of their lives, all three activists did 10 of the *exact same* things.

Some of these things we might want to imitate. Others we might want to avoid! And still others we might merely care to note with a wry, knowing smile.

Here is that list of common behaviors and experiences, cast in the form of a Ben Franklinesque to-do list.

1. Break with your family

"Mostly my mother made me feel bad about myself," Friedan says about her upbringing in Peoria, Illinois. "Nothing I did was ever right, ever satisfied her." The relationship was never really repaired. As for Friedan's dad, she'd stopped speaking to him after "he accused me of being a whore." She was told of his death by telephone. Only school was "escape from the screaming tortures of home, the continual assessing of my badness, my inadequacy."

Lewis grew up a poor sharecroppers' son in Alabama. And he is at pains to speak ill of no one. But he does point out that, even "knowing how I adored school, [my parents sometimes] insisted I had to stay at home . . . to help with the crops. I'd plead with them to let me go. I'd point out how far behind I'd fall if I missed those days of classwork." Sometimes he hid from them and snuck onto the schoolbus.

"I loved my parents mightily," Lewis explains, "but I could not live the way they did, taking the world as it was presented to them." Lewis's love was not always reciprocated. His parents were ashamed of his civil rights arrests and outraged that he refused to become a preacher. "It all added up to a schism that would take years to close," if it ever really did. Meanwhile, "the movement became my family."

Etzioni, born Werner Falk, is grateful that his parents left Nazi Germany before it was too late and fled to a cooperative farm in Palestine. But he did not thrive under their tutelage.

“My mother was a disciplinarian by culture; circumstances further hardened her heart.” As for his dad, he was vacant and “weak[.]” When young Etzioni’s horse died, he missed it because “his big eyes seemed to be the only warm ones around.”

He freely admits he “rebelled against [my] parents’ values and authority.” At the age of 16 he dropped out of high school to join the Jewish underground and fight for Israeli statehood. (His mother’s response: “How can you throw away your future!”) He rarely looked back, and though there are dozens of warm & fascinating photographs in the memoir (including one of Etzioni in uniform in 1948, with his underground buddies, holding a rifle), his parents appear in none of them.

2. Insist on a top-tier education

Friedan fought her father’s suggestion tooth and nail that she go to the local Peoria college. She managed to get into Smith, one of the most selective and demanding women’s colleges in the country, and after graduation won a series of fellowships to Berkeley to study psychology.

Lewis had no money, but was able to go off to American Baptist Theological Seminary, in Nashville, because it was tuition-free and had a work-study program. But he felt his B.A. there was “limited.” So when he got older he got himself into one of the best black colleges in the country, Fisk, and earned another whole B.A. -- in philosophy.

Etzioni, a high school dropout, couldn’t get into Hebrew University after the Israeli War of Independence, so he got himself to someplace even better -- Martin Buber’s college-level institute in Jerusalem. Eventually Etzioni emigrated to the U.S. and earned a Ph.D. in sociology at Berkeley, one of the two or three best graduate schools in sociology in the world at that time. (He earned his doctorate in a year and a half -- I get exhausted just thinking about that.)

3. Choose a significant early mentor

For Friedan it was her teachers Kurt Koffka and Karl Lewin, pioneers in Gestalt psychology and group dynamics. (Their theories about human potential helped give *The Feminine Mystique* its sense that women needed to have more and better options.)

For Lewis it was James Lawson, an extraordinarily effective teacher of nonviolent philosophy and action who spent much of his time in Nashville. And for Etzioni it was, inevitably, Martin Buber, arguably the greatest communitarian philosopher ever.

4. Engage in an early “militant” phase

Friedan has spent so many decades being right-baited by her radical feminist “allies” that it’s shocking to learn why she rejected her prestigious Ph.D. fellowship at Berkeley: “I told my professors I was going to . . . work for the ‘revolution.’”

She tries to say -- now -- that she wasn't being honest, but I don't buy it.

For one thing, I walked away from a prestigious graduate fellowship at the University of Toronto, in 1972, for exactly the same reason! For another thing, her revolutionary fervor appears to have been genuine. "I went to various radical study groups," she says. "We sneered at 'liberals,' we wanted to be the real thing, communists." She moved to New York where she actually did work as a reporter and editor for the *U.E. News*, the publication of the United Electrical Workers, one of the most radical labor unions in the country.

Lewis has spent so many decades being remembered as an "integrationist" in the civil rights movement that it's hard to remember his planned speech at the quasi-official March on Washington, in 1963, was considered to be so militant that it caused apoplexy among U.S. government officials and most of the other civil rights groups. But it did. And they made him tone it down.

Behind the statue at the Lincoln Memorial, as other civil rights leaders were delivering their speeches, Lewis was forced to delete such passages as a call to march "through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did," and a question asking, "which side is the federal government on?"

Etzioni's early opposition to the Vietnam war nearly cost him his professorship at Columbia. For years he traveled around the country lecturing at anti-war rallies and teach-ins, and once he addressed a crowd at Stanford waving his fist on top of a painter's ladder -- an appearance his more conservative colleagues haven't gotten over yet.

5. Participate in an early "communal" experience

After her marriage fell apart, Friedan spent years living communally or semi-communally with friends in huge houses on Long Island. "My God, we had fun," she says. Lewis spent years crashing in Freedom Houses in Mississippi -- homes where civil rights workers were welcome and often present in large numbers.

"Blacks and whites alike stayed [in them]," Lewis says. "We cooked together, ate together . . . and stayed up late talking together, all in a communal atmosphere in which a close sense of camaraderie developed." (I stayed at the Freedom House in Holly Springs, Miss., in 1964 and 1965, and like brothers in many large poor black families at the time, most guys even slept together in a huge bed covered with handmade quilts.)

As for Etzioni, he grew up on a cooperative farm, attended a boarding school that was run as a rural collective (mandatory two hours a day working the fields), lived in a kibbutz during his military training, and lived communally at Buber's institute. No wonder he became a communitarian *and also* ravenous for self-expression.

6. Define your lifework as a spiritual experience

Friedan, who's normally about as secular as a person can get, changes her tone completely when you get her on the subject of her work: "[I]t was mysterious, awesome, the way the writing of *The Feminine Mystique* took me over. . . . When I think about it now, it seems almost like a religious experience, as if some divine hand were guiding me, if I believed in such things."

Lewis may have a preacher's degree, but his most deeply spiritual observations have to do with activism and history. On activism: "We [civil rights workers] were venturing out basically on our own, becoming missionaries in a sense. But not missionaries in a traditional sense, because we were meeting the people on *their* terms, not ours" [emphasis in original - ed.].

And listen to Lewis on the history he made and is still making:

It was [in the civil rights movement] that I began believing in what I call the Spirit of History. Others might call it . . . a Guiding Hand. Whatever it is called, I came to believe that this force is on the side of what is good, of what is right and just. It is the essence of the moral force of the universe, *and at certain points in life, in the flow of human existence and circumstances, this force, this spirit, finds you or selects you, it chases you down, and you have no choice; you must allow yourself to be used, to be guided by this force and to carry out what must be done* [emphasis added - ed.].

You'd think Etzioni, soldier and academic, would be immune from this sort of spiritual talk. Well, he is, mostly -- but not when it comes to his work. He speaks of feeling somehow "compelled to act." Later he says, "It dawned on me that what I was after . . . was the special high . . . of participating in a project that was larger than life, greater than self." When discussing the emerging communitarian project with a friend, he found himself feeling "a high unlike any other." (Actually, it was like one other, which Lewis and everyone else in SNCC used to call "Freedom High." It's what we all lived for.)

7. Nurture a marked pragmatic streak

Friedan's principal difference with her radical sisters was her emphasis on bread-and-butter issues like employment discrimination and equal pay (rather than, e.g., pornography). Here's a totally-in-character Betty sentence: "Title VII, the provision against sex discrimination in employment, was the defining moment that made the women's movement possible." Not what the street crowd wanted to hear.

Lewis was constantly being beaten up by the left for being too "chummy" (his word) with President Johnson and Robert F. Kennedy -- merely the political movers-and-shakers of the age. And Etzioni resisted the temptation to become a full-time political activist not because he felt less urgency than Abbie Hoffman, but because "To maintain the [principled and deeply influential] kind of public voice I hoped to raise, I needed an academic base, to nurse its substance and integrity."

8. Develop a "shadow side" that contradicts your public image

In her memoir, Friedan casually says “I am notoriously hot-tempered and bitchy.” In case you weren’t paying attention, she says it again, 130 pages later: “I’ve always been a bad-tempered bitch.”

She confirms the rumors that she'd been battered in her marriage even while advising other women to leave abusive relationships. And she adds a Very Incorrect twist to that sad tale. She asserts that she used to taunt her husband into beating her. She had contempt for his business ventures and it irked her that he earned less money.

Lewis has always had the reputation of being saintly. (Getting arrested over 40 times during the civil rights movement contributed to that reputation, as did conducting himself totally nonviolently and with no apparent bitterness during all those episodes. I was at a SNCC meeting with him in Hattiesburg, Miss., I think it was, in 1965, and if anyone I’ve seen ever had an aura about them, it was he.)

When Lewis announced he’d be running against Julian Bond for Atlanta’s Congressional seat, the Atlanta newspaper quoted one political observer as saying, “John’s too nice. He’s not ready for D.C. He’s got too much goodness in his heart.” But during their televised debate, Lewis turned to Bond and said, “My friend. My brother. We were asked to take a drug test not long ago, and five of us went and took the test. [Where were you]?” Lewis won the election by four percentage points, with 90% of the white vote.

Etzioni is the staunch communitarian. But a certain very un-communitarian elitism pops out several times in the memoir. For example, when worrying about being dismissed from the Columbia faculty he said to himself, “The best I could hope for was finding a teaching job in some third-rate college in the boondocks.”

A nasty streak shows itself too. Etzioni says he regrets not having been “more tactful, more diplomatic” in his life, but those are crocodile tears I see falling. Here’s a passage from the memoir about someone he disagrees with:

I am not given to psychological explanations as to why [Daniel] Bell led the charge that we [communitarians] were [mere] popularizers. Maybe it was in response to an unfavorable book review I wrote of one of his books, in an academic journal, in which I pointed out that the book had little new to say, although it said it very well. Maybe Bell, who by his own account got his Ph.D. from a friend [at Columbia], without meeting the standard academic requirements, was trying to be holier than thou.

9. Be candid about the divisions within your movement or profession

Friedan devotes two eye-opening chapters to defending her actions and positions in the women's movement. The titles convey the flavor: “The Enemies Without and the Enemies Within,” and “Triumph and Treachery Within the Sisterhood.”

Lewis offers some of the best passages I’ve seen on the still underreported-on black-white tensions within SNCC. He’s equally candid on the tensions among the interracial democracy / Beloved Community advocates (Lewis et al.), the Black Power folks

(Stokely et al.), and the black nationalists / separatists (Bill Ware et al.), tensions that are all still with us.

Communitarians discovered that their loudest critics are the civil libertarians, and Etzioni doesn't like it. "I assumed we would clash with the religious fundamentalists," he says. "Instead, to my regret, from our very first day in the public eye, we were attacked by the ACLU." And not just attacked, but maligned.

For example, the ACLU's executive director routinely stated that "communitarian really means majoritarian." Not true! Or, for example, the ACLU's president once claimed that communitarians would "do away with the Bill of Rights." Etzioni responded as testily as I might have: "That is the worst kind of McCarthyism. Not a single [communitarian] was quoted or named."

Eventually Etzioni steps back, catches his breath, and offers some pertinent advice: "If one seeks the life of an activist [or a] public intellectual, one must be able to take a fair amount of frustration and rejection without allowing it to penetrate to the marrow of one's bones. . . . [T]he potshots do leave their marks. But a sense of purpose allows one to stubbornly keep going."

10. Develop a truly integrative worldview by the end of your journey

Toward the end of her memoir, Friedan looks back and says, "I don't feel that different, although I don't feel the same either. I think that I am wiser, that I somehow let myself get less polarized, that I can hold contradictions and conflicts in hand even if they're not resolved." Quite a good definition of life at the radical middle.

Lewis is equally reflective at the end: "I believe the next frontier for America lies in the direction of our spiritual growth as a community. . . . It is not just materially or militarily that we must measure our might, but morally. . . . [S]omebody needs to say, forcefully and with complete conviction, that we are . . . one people. . . . We don't speak that way anymore. I'm not sure we even *think* that way." A fine summing up of the radical middle outlook.

Etzioni also closes by wrapping his arms around the big picture: "[T]he main challenge the world face[s] is] religious fanaticism, which rushed to fill the moral vacuum left in the wake of modernism. . . . Filling the gnawing moral vacuum with moral dialogues and soft morality rather than state-driven, imposed values [is] a major communitarian task." And a major human task.

How to thank them

One of the most delightful things about reading these books together is that you discover how much the authors have absorbed from *each other's* efforts.

At one point you find Friedan badgering her NOW colleagues “to march on Washington as the black people had done.” And in a passage in Etzioni’s memoir, she credits Etzioni for giving her “a sort of philosophical grounding” for her pragmatic but visionary leadership of the women’s movement.

Lewis notes proudly that the “women’s movement has roots that can be traced back to Mississippi in the summer of ‘64.” And sounding much like Etzioni, he argues that “all human existence throughout history . . . has strived toward community, toward coming together.”

Etzioni says that the communitarian movement draws rich inspiration from when “African Americans held ‘sit-ins’ at segregated lunch counters.” And he doesn’t have to say anything about Friedan’s inspiration -- a photo of them in Etzioni’s book, looking old & wise, and with her shoulder burrowed into his ribs, says it all.

All these memoirists are over 65. They probably won’t be around too much longer. The best way to thank them for their extraordinary deeds and books is surely to absorb their messages as thoroughly as they’ve absorbed each other’s messages. And then to *use* those messages in constructing a radical middle movement that can change the way we live on Earth.

RE:SOURCES

For a peek at the left attack on these activists and their memoirs, see Wendy Steiner, [“Hear Her Roar,”](#) New York Times Book Review, June 25, 2000 (on Friedan); Mike Miller, [“The Winners Get To Write History,”](#) Civil Rights Movement Veterans Website, August 26, 1998 (on Lewis); and Robert Boynton, [“The Everything Expert,”](#) The Nation, July 14, 2003 (on Etzioni).

If I were a speed reader, I’d have included two more memoirs in this article: Jeri Laber, [The Courage of Strangers: Coming of Age with the Human Rights Movement](#) (PublicAffairs / Perseus Books Group, 2002), by the co-creator of Human Rights Watch; and Fran Peavey, [Heart Politics Revisited](#) (Pluto Press, 2000), by a long-time grassroots activist from San Francisco by way of Idaho.