to be a history teacher. There are no jobs right now, of course, so he's writing sports stories. But my son is going to be a teacher!"

At the time I didn't see the sorrow—or the latent anger. I blundered on about “statistical chances” of success. But slowly it dawned on me what that worker was communicating. Not anger at the system, but anguish. He didn't want what I was saying to be true. His life, his pride and sacrifice were bound up with the Dream.

In many families, the Dream is where love takes place. It is through the Dream that parents give their children the only gift they think can made a real difference—the chance to become somebody. They can't give their offspring a house in the best suburb. They can't give them Harvard or memories of deep carpets and quiet talk. But they can give them the Dream. And it is the Dream that keeps the kids decent, in school and obeying the teacher, growing up in embattled neighborhoods where many flame out early.

Moreover, it is the success of succeeding generations that sanctifies the parents' sacrifice. Children can say “thank you” by succeeding. Right in the middle of the Dream is where the meaning of many American families is made whole. (And it is in families that most of us live our meanings.) A sense of continuity, of giving and receiving gifts across the generations, is confirmed.

No, my news was not good news to that worker. It hurt. And I was not gentle in breaking the news. I simply told him what I knew “statistically” to be true. I didn't help that man in his grieving. I didn't even see his grief at first.

Precisely here is where we are as a nation right now—much grieving with little understanding, truth-saying critics who don't see that they must also give comfort. For that is what grief requires—affirmation of prior attachments in order, slowly, to let them go. Otherwise, anger consumes, defeating the necessary work of sorrow.

There will in any case be plenty of anger, even with the most gentle handling. There will be anger and a sense of betrayal at the failing Dream. And in the next moment, there will be the most desperate and insistent clinging to that earlier attachment, and the most threatening behavior toward those who announce that it is over. All this is to be expected. It is the classical response to loss. And loss is at the center of our times. We are a nation in mourning.

'A CHANCE TO BECOME SOMEBODY'

To grieve means that first we must affirm. The American Dream began as an explosion of self-confidence. It was the boisterous and proud proclamation of a New World. Unlike the old world, where privilege came with birth and people knew where they belonged, in America we were to be unshackled from the bondage of previous generations. Ours was to be a land not of family fate, but of individual freedom.

Primogeniture laws were revoked soon after the Revolution. Wealth