was to belong to the successful seeker, not to the lucky inheritor. In America no one was to have the unfair advantage of simply “being” who he or she was—by name, by birth, by the accident of parental status. One was “to be” only what one could become.

Equal opportunity became the ideal by which we sought to transcribe into social practice this inalienable right to personal recognition. The Land of Promise offered the “chance to become somebody” in a land made open because nobody could simply be. There was, you can see, a certain fever in it, a kind of driven boisterousness.

This promise set loose an amazing expansion of self-esteem. It broke through the sedentary and determined quality of old-world societies where heart and vision were tamed early. There was a freedom to our land which made us, and in the eyes of much of the world still makes us, vastly appealing.

We were blessed in this restless urging by open frontiers. First, there was the open west (open except for the presence of the Indians), which promised new space for those cramped and held back by land that required the subservience of children to parents, of tiller to landlord—age-old cobwebs of obsequious relating.

Then, even as the west closed down, the new frontier of machine industry and rapid economic growth opened itself to the great waves of immigrants who came to our shores from 1848 through 1914 fleeing famine, war, religious and economic oppression. Still a third frontier kept the Dream rolling when again it was in danger of getting boxed in. President Franklin D. Roosevelt accepted “the challenge of history,” and the American economy inherited the victory of World War II. Great Britain, France, Germany, Japan—our industrial rivals—were, for a while, eclipsed in the expansion of American power.

The pie of national wealth kept enlarging rapidly. “Equal opportunity” made room for itself not by a relative equality of belonging—over the years the shares of wealth remained highly concentrated and essentially unchanged—but by expanding the space within which the competing hopes of various persons and groups could find a place. We were never so much an open society as a wide-open society consolidated not by distributive justice but by expansion of the field of available opportunities.

For a while, this process worked. It broke open people’s sense of what they could expect, from themselves and from their children. It set loose the energy of a vast yearning across our land. The Land of Promise energized itself and became yeasty on the quest of people’s dignity to find public place and recognition.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF ‘EQUAL OPPORTUNITY’

Just here, of course, immense ironies opened up. The land where people could not “be” who they were (by birth and place), but must “become,” produced unintended a quiet stampede where each could find