personal worth only by outdoing others in the crowded marketplace of repute. It was not just because the race was never equal, and because the ones on top always guarded their advantage, but because of an inherent contradiction that equal opportunity ended not in confirming self-esteem but in endlessly undermining a person's sense of firm and proven recognition. If we are permitted "to be" only what we can become, then we are never secure with who or where we are. We do not pursue so much as we are pursued by the hopes of what someday we may become.

Self-esteem became in our society a competitive commodity that pitted achievement against fraternity, made success the enemy of community, and undermined companionship with competitive performance. As a nation we short-circuited. Our fundamental values—freedom and personal dignity—were, by our public means of pursuing them, turned back upon themselves. We ended up undermining the self-esteem we meant to give room to.

Today, our values have been brought into a critical state of tension. Not only is equal opportunity inherently contradictory; it is also a social ideal that has functioned only under the conditions of a rapidly expanding economy. Wealth shares have remained consistently and steeply unequal in our country—the top 1 and 2 per cent of our population hold respectively 28 and 44 per cent of all the personally owned wealth. There is simply no way, except by rapid economic growth, to let the steam out of the American Dream. And today, it is precisely the future of rapid economic growth that has been cast into serious doubt.

This development makes our age a time of loss, a time of grieving. We suspect—rightly, I believe—that a whole way of fulfilling the promise of our land is ending. It has come up against the hard economic facts of newly expensive energy and basic raw materials. Whatever we do in the short run to push up, for a while, our gross national product, the background reality will remain long-range inflation. World economic patterns are shifting, with the rise of new "middle-class" nations like Japan, Brazil and the eastern European countries ready to compete with us for the Good Life, making that life even more expensive. Third World heads of government gain economic leverage by the nationalization and cartelization of domestic resources.

Our time of virtual economic hegemony is ending. The privileged "third frontier" we've enjoyed since World War II is closing. As a nation, we will have to learn to live with a slower economic growth rate and a flattened-out curve of life-style expectations. This won't be easy. Infinite expansiveness, not limits, is what we've been taught to admire.

Thus ours is a time of grief with all its ambivalent emotions: anger at the faltering Dream, and anger at those who announce that it's faltering. That's why we must deal carefully with each other. As a people and as persons, we have made sacrifices to the Dream. We have exchanged gifts across the generations. Or we have grown angry between the