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OPINION

Dangerously Close to Falling Back

Gains on equality and justice are under attack

BY REV. AL SHARPTON

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the great "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom". It was there, at one of the largest rallies for human rights, that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech.

On Aug. 28, 1963, Dr. King and all those gathered in Washington, D.C., addressed the notion of greater equality and justice in America in a way which could no longer be ignored. Thanks to Dr. King's unyielding work, and the work of countless others before and after him, laws like the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were eventually passed, and victories were achieved in the struggle for civil rights.

In the time since, we've watched people of color break down barriers across the board - including into the highest office of the land.



Progress over the last five decades is undeniable. But now 50 years after the "March on Washington", we are dangerously close to regressing on some of the most fundamental advancements in our society.

The Supreme Court of the United States is set to rule on several key items this year that are at the core of justice and equality in America. *Shelby v. Holder* challenges Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act itself. A key aspect of the Act, Section 5 requires jurisdictions that have a history of discriminatory voting practices to obtain advanced approval from the federal government before they can alter election laws.

Without Section 5, the basic foundation of the Voting Rights Act would be destroyed. The floodgates of biased and disenfranchising practices like harsh new voter ID laws would open and the protection of our participation in the voting process would be eliminated.

Voting rights for all American citizens was a basic principle of Dr. King and all those who sacrificed during the civil rights struggle and in subsequent years. Ironically, half a century after Dr. King's speech, voter equality is under attack all over again.

In addition to the Voting Rights Act, one of the greatest advancements toward equality we achieved in this nation was the ability of those who were traditionally excluded from higher learning to attend our great colleges and universities.

Well, in 2013, affirmative action hangs in the balance. Two cases, *Fisher v. University of Texas* and a Michigan law banning affirmative action in public college admissions, have reached the Supreme Court.

The outcome of these two cases will have serious ramifications for the admission practices of schools throughout the country. At a time when our educational system is severely leaving minority and poor students behind, some are attempting to eliminate laws designed to create a more even playing field.

Our society is growing ever diverse, and our institutions of higher learning need to reflect that diversity. Affirmative action doesn't mean preferential treatment; it means equalizing an imbalanced scale. The future of so many students remains in limbo as the high court weighs in this year on these crucial cases.

This year marks another milestone in this

nation's history: the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

In the last 150 years, we've witnessed momentous progress that was achieved only because of the selfless acts of many. Folks have marched, rallied, organized, boycotted, withstood beatings, bombings, water hoses, dogs and some even died for the cause of justice.

In a post-civil rights era, laws such as the Voting Rights Act and affirmative action appeared etched in stone permanently. But now the state of justice and equality in America remains to be determined because of these renewed attempts to repeal such laws.

We can either continue on a path toward greater freedom for all, or regress back to the wrong side of history.

The generation of Dr. King, and the generation immediately behind him continued fighting until they got voting rights and affirmative action on the books. We must not become the generation that couldn't sustain and maintain it.

Rev. Al Sharpton is president and chief executive officer of the National Action Network and host of *PoliticsNation* on MSNBC.

It Does Take a Village to Grow Our Best

We are called to share our gifts

BY BENTLEY DE BARDELABEN

Despite current ideology in some groups, it does take a village to help us grow into our best selves. The Nigerian proverb "Ora na azu nwa" translates "it takes the community to raise a child." I totally agree.



At several stages of my development from boyhood to adulthood, I recall being fed, loved, scolded, encouraged and forgiven by people in my community. They all saw it to be their duty to shape me into becoming the man I am — a man of humility, integrity, service, and accountability while reminding me to assist others in their development as I matured.

Sure, there were instances when I lost my way or fell prey to the hype about my achievements. Yet I recognize that I would not be who I am without having been loved and guided by individuals inside and outside of my home. Each believed not only in my potential but also in their responsibility to shape me.

At such times when infants, children and adults are baptized into a religious community the congregation is asked to promise to provide love, support and care as the one being baptized grows in faith. The community responds in affirmation.

Recently, President Obama delivered a commencement address to the 2013 graduating class attending Morehouse College.

As I read his manuscript, I was reminded of how important the notion of "Ora na azu nwa" is to me. No matter how many times I hear people say that they "accomplished all of their success on their own or pulled themselves up by their own boot-

straps," I cringe. The truth is we all receive assistance at differing points along the way.

Parents, siblings, teachers, ministers, business leaders, even politicians have inspired us. Each has been a role model whether they knew

There are some things... that you are obliged to do for those still left behind. As graduates... you now wield something even more powerful than the diploma you are about to collect. And that's the power of your example... use that power for something larger than yourself." That's "Ora na azu nwa."

— President Obama

it or not.

Those who knew me often wouldn't let me quit when things were toughest. Communally they would remind me that, "trouble doesn't last always." Certainly, I didn't always believe they under-

stood my plight, though in actuality the specifics didn't matter. The man they educated, along with the wisdom of their collective experiences, was enough for them to trust that the right outcome would eventually manifest.

President Obama reminded the college graduates that as products of Morehouse they weren't to be clever, "but rather honest men, men who can be trusted in public and private life — men who are sensitive to the wrongs, the sufferings, and

injustices of society and who are willing to accept responsibility for correcting [those] ills."

Obama continued, "There are some things... that you are obliged to do for those still left behind. As graduates... you now wield something even more powerful than the diploma you are about to collect. And that's the power of your example... use that power for something larger than yourself." That's "Ora na azu nwa."

"Ora na azu nwa" encompasses all aspects of communal life. To embrace this ideology invites us to understand that we are called to share our gifts of time, treasure and talents with all, especially the young. This ensures success for the children, the elders and community as together we grow in service to one another.

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The Portland Observer Established 1970

PUBLISHER: Mark Washington

EDITOR: Michael Leighton

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Rakeem Washington

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: Paul Neufeldt

OFFICE MANAGER/CLASSIFIEDS: Lucinda Baldwin

ADVERTISING MANAGER: Leonard Latin

USPS 959-680

4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97211

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