

Thriving and flourishing personally and professionally in times of uncertainty¹

Speech written and presented by Dr. Sydney Freeman, Jr.

I would like to say thank you to Victor and his team for this invitation. We are all so grateful for your leadership. Also, I would like to give a special thank you to Dr. Ahmed Ibrahim for his guidance in the form of serving as sponsor of this group of emerging leaders.

Before I go any further, I would like to give a land acknowledgement:

U of I Moscow is located on the homelands of the Nimiipu (Nez Perce), Palus (Palouse) and Schitsu'umsh (Coeur d'Alene) tribes. We extend gratitude to the indigenous people that call this place home, since time immemorial. U of I recognizes that it is our academic responsibility to build relationships with the indigenous people to ensure integrity of tribal voices.²

And I think it appropriate to provide a Labor Acknowledgement that was written by Dr. TJ Stewart given the contributions of African Americans to this institution, state, and the country:

We must acknowledge that much of what we know of this country today, including its culture, economic growth, and development throughout history and across time, has been made possible by the labor of enslaved Africans and their ascendants who suffered the horror of the transatlantic trafficking of their people, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow. We are indebted to their labor and their sacrifice, and we must acknowledge the tremors of that violence throughout the generations and the resulting impact that can still be felt and witnessed today.³

Charles Dickens put it this way, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"⁴.

It is the best of times because we have had a Black man who has served as a US President, a Black female who serves as US Vice President, and just confirmed our first Black woman as a supreme court justice. On campus in the last five years, we have created a Black Cultural Center, a Black Lives Matter Speaker Series, a Black Faculty & Staff Association, a Black History Research Lab, and an Africana Studies academic program. Much progress on behalf of Black people on campus has been made.

¹ This speech was given on April 20, 2022, at the University of Idaho's 15th Annual National Society of Black Engineers-Dynamic Engineers Lecture Series in the IRIC (Integrated Research and Innovation Center) Atrium.

² University of Idaho Libraries (2022). Land Acknowledgement Information. *University of Idaho Libraries*.

<https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/about/landacknowledgment.html>

³ Stewart, T. (2021). On Labor Acknowledgements and Honoring the Sacrifice of Black Americans. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*.

<https://www.diverseeducation.com/demographics/african-american/article/15108677/on-labor-acknowledgement-s-and-honoring-the-sacrifice-of-black-americans>

⁴ Rottke, J. (2020). "The Best of Times, the Worst of Times". *The Dickens Project*.

<https://dickens.ucsc.edu/programs/dickens-to-go/best-of-times.html#:~:text=%22It%20was%20the%20best%20of%20everything%20before%20us%2C%20we>

However, according to the International Crisis Group⁵, an organization that tracks civil and multi-country conflicts, the Ukraine is not the only country that is being devastated by violence. On the continent of Africa alone as we speak there are 8 escalating wars taking place in countries such as Mali, Niger, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Libya. And closer to home the Idaho state legislature discourages the teaching of Critical Race Theory at its state institutions.

Many of us have experienced various forms of trauma due to the impacts of the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and anti-Black racism. Many of us have had to live through navigating the pandemic while its effects decimated the physical and mental health of our families and loved ones. Navigating feelings of guilt of being away from home not being able to comfort our loved ones in the states or overseas. Some of us have gone through things that hurt so bad that we can't even share do to trying to protect the feelings of our loved ones. All the while we are still expected to go to school and perform like nothing has changed.

So, when asked to give this talk. I sensed that people were particularly intrigued that I present myself authentically and unapologetically Black. And I have a strong commitment to celebrating my cultural heritage. I have bucked conventional wisdom, as many emerging African Americans are told you will be unsuccessful if you come off too Black. However, I have identified three keys based on my own experience that has allowed me to thrive in my career.

The three keys are:

1. Knowing Who you are
2. Knowing Whose you are
3. Knowing Who you want to become

So, for the rest of the balance of my time I will discuss this three-point framework that I believe will help you to advance during your time here at the University of Idaho and beyond.

Know Who you are

So, the first key is knowing who you are. In my case I am clear on who I am. I am a Christian, Husband, Brother and someone who is unapologetically Black.

Everyone who is a person of color has been socialized to adapt to white mainstream norms to survive in this country. Black people in particular have been socialized to hate themselves and each other. One way this plays out is believing the lies that are told about each other. For instance, I have been here for more than 7-years now. I have seen a lot of things, particularly immigrants from the continent of Africa and the Caribbean being told not to associate with African Americans because African Americans perceive themselves to be better than immigrants. And this has happened in reverse where some of those hailing from the continent and Caribbean don't want to be called Black or associated with African Americans due to racist stereotypes that seek to pit us against each other. Know that when people racially discriminate against you, they don't care where you are originally from. You are Black.

⁵ International Crisis Group (2022). Crisis Watch: Tracking Conflict Worldwide. *International Crisis Group*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch>

We must be careful not to let white institutions and organizations divide us. For instance, know and acknowledge when people are hiring you or preferencing you for opportunities because you are an immigrant over an African American. Don't fall into the trap that makes you feel like you are better. Remember that you would not be here if it were not for African Americans dying and shedding blood in the streets for you and your families to have the opportunity to fly over here on Kenya Airways, Qatar Airways, Ethiopian Air, and British Airways.

The great civil rights leader, Malcolm X said,

If you form the habit of taking what someone else says about a thing without checking it out for yourself, you'll find that other people will have you hating your friends and loving your enemies⁶.

So, if you are to thrive and flourish you must know who you are.

Know Whose you are

So, after knowing who you are, you must know whose you are. I always remember that I am Sydney Freeman, Sr. and Cassandra Freeman's baby boy, I am husband to the prettiest woman on the planet, Dr. Lynda Freeman, and someone that is accountable to my community. We all must recognize that we stand on the shoulders of those who loved and sacrificed for us to be here. Many of us have had to leave families to come here. Many of us being first generation college students whose families are often in less privileged positions than us have their hopes and dreams attached to our success.

In the mist of earning your degree and starting your career don't lose your values instilled by your parents and community. Remember that you don't just represent yourself. You represent your community. My dad used to say, "The world doesn't love you, your family does". And over my career I have seen that to be the case.

To my first-generation American students. Please know that America does not love you. It tolerates you to the extent it can use you. Don't confuse being tolerated for being celebrated.

While I am a fierce advocate that each of you should be unapologetically Black, by that meaning embracing and celebrating who you are as a member of the African diasporic family. The old saying is also true, "That everyone that is your same color is not your same kind". Meaning just because we are all Black doesn't mean we think alike, believe alike, and must be best friends. Having a diverse selection of friends with like-minded values of seeking excellence, justice, and liberation will be key to your success.

Know that in life that you will have what Business Mogul, T.D. Jakes⁷ describes as Comrades, Confidants and Constituents.

He describes Confidants as your real close friends. You can share your inmost feelings and your Confidants will still stay with you. You can be transparent with them. Confidants are for you. Not just

⁶ X, M. (2022). Malcolm X Quotes. *AZ Quotes*. <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1092597>

⁷ Jakes, T. D. (2020). Comrades, Confidants, Constituents Bishop TD Jakes.

Leigh Crutch & Associates. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gc3MBfNnOoQ>

because they want something from you. They are the friend you can call in the middle of the night if you are in trouble and they will protect you and not try to embarrass you. If you have three of these kind of friends in a lifetime you are blessed.

Then you have what Jakes describes as Constituents. They are people that are with you because they believe in your cause and mission. They are those who are with you because they want to see the project you have succeed. However, don't confuse them with Confidants because they are Constituents. And are not motivated to support you because they love you. Your goals are just aligned. Constituents are friends that will leave in a minute if they find someone to help them fulfil the mission or cause faster.

So, some people will join your group because they need leadership experience, and it will look good on their resume. Not because they like you and committed to supporting you. And if they find another organization that will look better on their resume, they will drop your group to join the other group because they were not ever committed to you or the group, they were committed to the cause. Make sure you don't get confidants and constituents mixed up. Because confidants are with you for the long-haul and constituents are there as long as they are getting something from you.

And then you have comrades which are people that are against what you are against. They are individuals that may not be your best friends. But support you to fight against something they believe in. It could be racism, homophobia, or climate change. They are there to support you because they agree with the cause you are fighting for, not you.

So, to know whose you are it is important to cultivate and cherish the relationships you have with your Confidants.

With that said, when knowing whose you are don't limit it to just family, loved ones and confidants. Know at the University of Idaho you have individuals within the Black faculty and staff association that are here to support you. We helped advocate for the Black & African American Cultural Center to be reestablished along with getting a director hired. Know that the center is there for you. So, know that apart of who you are is a member of a strong Black community at UI.

Know where you are going

So, after discovering who you and whose you are. Lastly you must know where you are going. It has been my priority to leave a legacy for my family and community. That is not just financially but maintain a good name. Legacy building shapes my almost everything I do as I want to leave the world a better place.

For me investing in travel and once in a lifetime experiences have broadened my perspective of what I can do and achieve. I have also learned to have a healthy distrust of being celebrated. I try to never get too high or too low. I try to keep perspective that my work is not just for me but for my larger community.

I will close with this. I know where I am going because I am committed to the tenants of the Black Transformation model.⁸ I would encourage you to commit to it tenants to which is first to decolonize your mind. Which is to let go of colonial practices, values, and culture. Adopting and returning to

⁸ Paragraphs previously appeared in the article: Freeman, Jr., S. (2021). The Future of Black Scholars. *Diverse Issues of Higher Education*. <https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15113596/the-future-of-black-scholars>

indigenous ways of knowing and being. In other words, a change of mindset centering African ways of thinking and living.

The second step is Abolition. I define Abolition as being willing to fight injustice and dismantle practices, systems, institutions, or power structures that dehumanize Black people.

The third tenant is Revolution. I define revolution as a fundamental change from the status quo that facilitates new ways of knowing, being, and operating.

The fourth step is Liberation. To be liberated is to be free from forms of spiritual, psychological, and physical oppression and captivity.

The last tenant is Sovereignty. When I say sovereignty, I am stating that I will be committed to supporting and/or establishing Black-owned and operated higher education institutions. Embracing these principles along with knowing who you are and whose you are and where you are going will position you to thrive and flourish personally and professionally in times of uncertainty.

Thank you!