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## **Seeking to create Black Transformation amidst the Pandemic of Anti-Blackness**

**By Sydney Freeman, Jr.**

Recently, I received a frantic text message from a colleague who leads a Black cultural center. They had been notified by their supervisor that they needed to have a conversation about a communication that they were apart of which solicited funds to support Black student programming. Their vigilance in protecting the center and position is not unwarranted. University leaders at the person's institution have sent down messages throughout the university that any usage of language and terminology like diversity, equity, and inclusion on the institution's website and formal communications should be removed. And while I am one who sees language such as diversity, equity, and inclusion as [terms of appeasement](#) for white folks. Not even that language can be utilized to show support for minoritized students and in particular Black students.



### **Fighting for Justice**

While those like my colleague have to find unique ways to support their students. Individuals like me find themselves in other challenging positions because conservative special interest groups have targeted faculty and staff via reports to the Idaho state legislature. And these governmental officials have threatened to take away state funding if any of the money provided by the state is found used for any diversity initiatives. And of course, initiatives related to Black people are at the top the list.

So, while I find myself fighting for the rights and dignity of Black folks in this context. I am also reminded of the toll such anti-Blackness can take on African Americans, in particular Black women. As it was not to long ago [that two Black women college presidents died](#) while in the midst of engaging in their daily presidential responsibilities. Being reminded that our jobs don't love us, and we must be sure to take care of ourselves in the midst of doing our job responsibilities and social and racial justice work. You like me may find yourself in situations where white folks and others of privileged status who claim allyship are shrinking back just during the times when you need them to speak up the most.

### **This is our Civil Rights Movement**

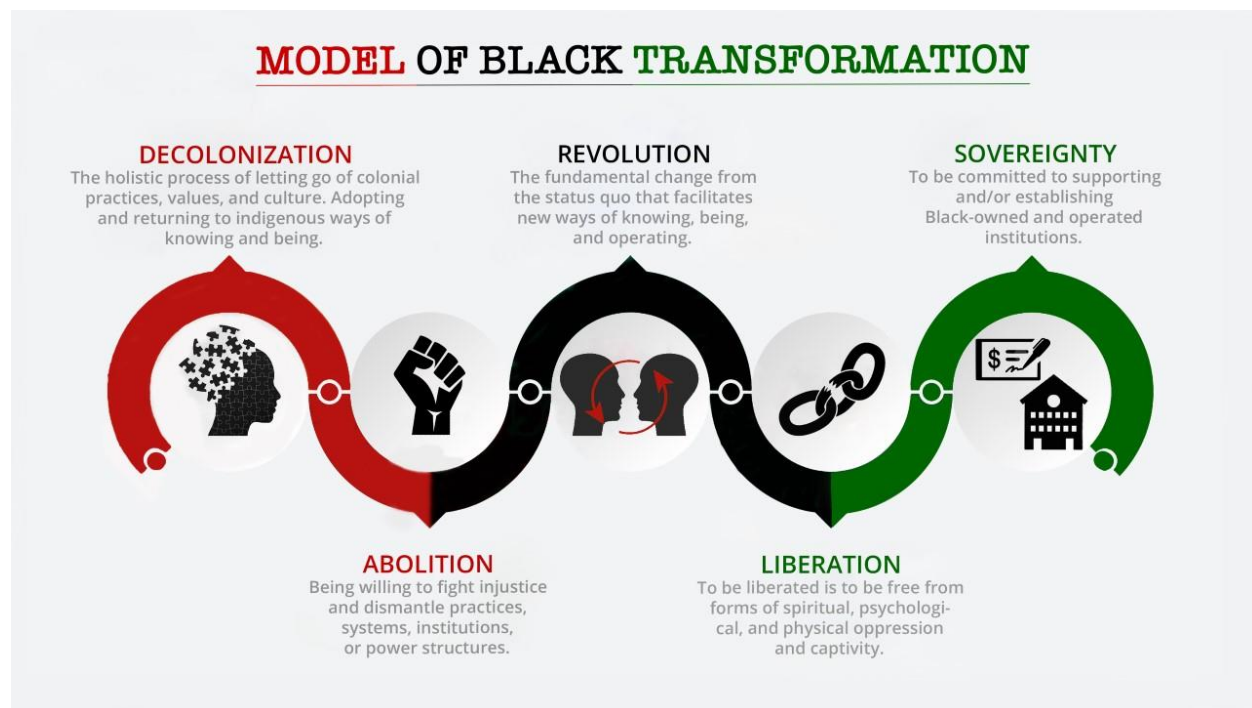
You don't have to ask many of us what we would be doing during the civil rights movement. We are experiencing a form of that right now as many of us are dealing with racial gaslighting, isolation,

demotions and more. It can often feel like the metaphorical equivalent of water hoses, fire bombings and German shepherds when those in power react to us speaking truth to power, especially when it comes to issues of race. Who needs to bring up avowed racist former Alabama Governor George Wallace from the 60's, when we currently have Governors like Ron DiSantis from Florida, Sarah Huckabee Sanders from Arkansas, and Greg Abbott from Texas.

Given these factors many of us are taking the must needed rest that Tricia Hersey suggests in her New York Times Bestseller, [“Rest is Resistance”](#). Others of us still have a little more prophetic fire shut up in our bones that we find in the book of Jeremiah 20:9. We can't just sit back and do nothing when evil prevails as the Bible talks about in Proverbs 24:11-12. I find myself in that camp. I can't just do nothing.

### Application of the Model of Black Transformation

So, how do I remain sane in an insane time? God gave me a framework a few years ago called the Model of Black Transformation, which guides and focuses my Black liberatory work. There are five steps to this framework. The first step is **decolonization**, the second step is **abolition**, the third step is **revolution**, the fourth step is **liberation**, and the fifth step is **sovereignty**.



When I think of the first step **decolonization**, I think about the re-indigenization process, which I have defined as, the holistic process of letting go of colonial practices, values, and culture. Adopting and returning to African indigenous ways of knowing and being. For me during the past several years that has looked like engaging in research regarding decolonizing the history of the university that I work at so that it is inclusive of the contributions that Black people have made to the institution. Working with students to establish the University of Idaho's Black History Research Lab that has quietly been effective in telling

“Our” story. In the last two years even in an institutional culture that is anti-Black in a conservative state that some might describe as “the heartland of white supremacy” in the Pacific Northwest. We have chosen to share the decolonized version of Black history in the form of an online archive, traveling exhibit, online/digital curriculum, speeches around the state, media appearances, and a book.

While **decolonization** is the first step, **abolition** is the second. Although I define abolition as being willing to fight injustice and dismantle practices systems, institutions, or power structures. I have learned that my **abolitionist** tactics had to be modified given our present moment. Sometimes it is better to create a separate independent structure like I have done in the form of establishing my 501c3 nonprofit, the//liberation Movement, Inc. That gives me space so that I don’t have to navigate the institutional constraints that often come in working with church and educational organizations. I have been able to raise and funnel money to the Liberation Movement to create academic scholarships such as the ones I established in the name of my deceased high school classmate, Brandon Williams at Pine Forge Academy in Pennsylvania. I started with a \$500 scholarship and have now grown it to \$5,000. Pine Forge is one of four Historically Black Boarding Academies, and its property was once used as a major stop on the underground railroad. Additionally, we have created a grant to sponsor the development for a book on Black theology.

After I moved from the abolition stage, I began engaging in **revolution**. Which I believe is the fundamental change from the status quo that facilitates new ways of knowing, being, and operating. While Gil Scott-Heron said, “The revolution will not be televised.” I have taken another approach and gone to the media and let them know about my work of Black empowerment through daily posts on X, formerly known as twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and on Facebook. I write Op-eds in the local newspaper and in national higher education periodicals. I don’t mind sharing my thoughts on television news programs and partnering with other community organizations to change policies and practices that are harmful to the Black community. This has led to my team being recognized by the Governor of Idaho and receiving a commendation from the US Senate. To **revolutionize** your community, it’s important to be willing to promote your work so people know what you do and can support and help you.

While working towards **revolution** is paramount, **Black Liberation** is the goal. As I said in a [speech](#) given on February 15, 2022, at the grand opening of the Black History at University of Idaho exhibit. Through engagement with multiple stakeholders and colleagues at my institution.

“Creating a Black Faculty & Staff Association and Black Lives Matter speaker series in a time of anti-Blackness and racial misinformation are liberatory acts that will be forever apart of the University of Idaho’s history.”

**Liberation** also looks like utilizing state and university resources to write and publish books on historical Black figures such as Dr. Owen Troy, Sr., who we describe in the book as a social justice theologian. But being smart enough to publish and copyright it under the Liberation Movement, Inc. so that it remains ours.

It is important to ensure that our work lives on in ways that outlive us. Before and while we are resting and recharging, we should be making certain that we have mentored and coached others in such a way that we can step away and the work moves forward. However, I don’t necessarily subscribe to the saying that “there is not success without a successor.” Sometimes we are called to be what my mentor and fellow JCSTS Drum Major for Justice alum, [Minister Ronnie Vanderhorst](#) calls being a seed planter. Not in

every case will you be able to be the person to see the vision completely through and God may not have provided you with a mentee. But it is still important to do the work God has called you to do.

Which leads me to the last step of the model of transformation and that is **Sovereignty**. I have defined this step as being committed to supporting and/or establishing Black-owned and operated businesses. For me that has looked like being intentional in purchasing clothing and other goods from Black owned businesses even from Idaho. It also means when I come to places in Atlanta, I intentionally patronize Black owned restaurants such as Q-Time, This IS It, Slutty Vegan, and most recently Paschal's. It also looks like negotiating with my university president to provide space for and re-establish a Black Cultural Center at the University of Idaho and ensure that it hired a full-time director. Creating a **Sovereign** space also looks like conceptualizing and establishing a grant that was awarded to my Undergraduate HBCU, Oakwood University so they can now have a Social Justice Center.

When seeking to create Black Transformation amidst the Pandemic of Anti-Blackness I hope the examples I provided gives you a template to achieve your social and racial justice objectives and goals.