

A VORTEX OF POSSIBILITIES

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
Senior Minister, All Souls NYC
November 26, 2023

On September 15, 1963, four members of the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist terrorist group, planted 19 sticks of dynamite attached to a timing device beneath steps of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The resulting explosion killed four girls — three 11-year-olds and one 14-year-old — and injured more than a dozen others.

By the following year, the FBI had identified the four white men responsible, but none of them was prosecuted for more than a decade. One of the perpetrators was eventually convicted in 1977 and two others in 2000 and 2001. The fourth perpetrator died without being charged.

The widespread outrage at this heinous act of terror has been widely acknowledged by historians as marking a turning point in the struggle for civil rights in the US. It also bolstered support for the Civil Rights Act, which the U.S. Congress passed the following year, in 1964. When something horrible happens, it sometimes makes possible something that otherwise seems out of reach.

Sixty years ago last Saturday, and just two months after the Birmingham bombing, jazz legend John Coltrane recorded an extraordinary memorial to the four victims, a tune titled “Alabama.” Jazz historian Bill Cole, in his 1977 biography of Coltrane, asserts that the melody “was developed from the rhythmic inflections of speech given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” King had described the bombing as “one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity.”

Coltrane’s [original recording of “Alabama,”](#) which was later released on his album “Live at Birdland,” remains my favorite of Coltrane’s recordings — an exquisitely nuanced and hauntingly elegiac tribute to the interplay of love and loss. This interplay was a dynamic Coltrane knew well in his own life.

Coltrane had reached the pinnacle of the jazz world, playing saxophone and touring with Miles Davis. But Coltrane’s long-standing struggle with drug and alcohol addictions finally caught up with him, and his extraordinary playing eventually didn’t counterbalance his unreliable and erratic behavior. Davis fired Coltrane in April 1957. The two would reconcile and tour together again before parting amicably after their tour in 1960. But getting fired in 1957 prompted Coltrane to try to set his life on a new course.

One year after Coltrane recorded “Alabama,” he went into the studio on December 9, 1964 and recorded an album titled “A Love Supreme” in a single session. The album, composed of a suite in four movements, is universally regarded not only as

Coltrane's masterpiece, but also as one of the finest jazz albums ever produced. According to Coltrane's wife Alice Coltrane, an estimable jazz composer and musician in her own right, John composed the album in one two-week burst of creativity at their home in Dix Hills on Long Island.

When John emerged after completing the composition, Alice reported that he seemed "like Moses coming down from the mountain." John echoed Alice's sense that something enduring had transpired. He said, "It's the first time I have everything ready. I know exactly what I'm going to do in the studio."

In the liner notes to the album, Coltrane writes, alluding to his firing by Miles Davis, "In the year of 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening, which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life." He adds, "As time and events moved on, I entered into a phase which is contradictory to the pledge and away from the esteemed path. But thankfully now, through the merciful hand of God, I do perceive and have been fully reformed of [God's] omnipotence. It is truly a love supreme."

"This album," Coltrane says, "is a humble offering to God — an attempt to say thank you to God through our work, even as we do through our hearts and our tongues." My goal, Coltrane adds, "is to uplift people as much as I can — to inspire them to reach more and more of their capacities to live meaningful lives."

"A Love Supreme" takes themes that appear elsewhere in Coltrane's life and music — science and spirituality, music and mysticism — and unites them in one sustained musical masterpiece. Jazz critic Martin Gayford, in his review for *The Daily Telegraph*, says that the album "marked the point at which jazz — for good or ill — ceased for a while to be hip and cool, becoming instead mystical and messianic."

In the album, Coltrane reaffirms his faith by moving through four phases: Acknowledgment, Resolution, Pursuance, and Psalms. Rev. Franzo Wayne King, pastor of the Saint John Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco, describes the album as the cornerstone of his congregation.

King says, "When you look at the composition of titles and the sequence in which John has them laid out, we say that there's a formula in that album. When he says, 'Acknowledgement, resolution and pursuance,' it's like saying... 'melody, harmony and rhythm.' In other words, you have to acknowledge and then you resolve and then you pursue, and the manifestation of it is a love supreme."

Acknowledge, resolve, pursue: Coltrane correctly describes this sequence as the path to spiritual awakening. Acknowledge your circumstances with as much clarity and honesty as you can, no matter how distressing or difficult they may be. Resolve to do what you can to change things for the better. Pursue a richer, fuller, and more productive life with as much diligence and discipline as you can muster. Acknowledge, resolve, pursue: it's a well-proven and time-honored process of transformation.

But there is one other aspect to Coltrane's vision of transformation that's worth mentioning. In the first part of Coltrane's composition, titled "Acknowledgment," he

chants the phrase “a love supreme” repeatedly. This motif becomes the foundation of the entire suite.

Lewis Porter, author of *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*, describes what happens next. He says, “Coltrane's more or less finished his improvisation, and he just starts playing the ‘Love Supreme’ motif, but he changes the key another time, another time, another time. This is something very unusual... And if you actually follow it through, he ends up playing this little ‘Love Supreme’ theme in all 12 possible keys.”

Porter adds, “To me, he's giving you a message here. First of all, he's introduced the idea. He's experimented with it. He's improvised with it with great intensity. Now he's saying it's everywhere. It's in all 12 keys. Anywhere you look, you're going to find this ‘Love Supreme.’”

By playing his theme in all possible keys in the acknowledgment section of his suite, I take Coltrane to be suggesting that when we acknowledge our circumstances, we have to acknowledge everything — the bad things and also the good things, the things that are present and also the things that are possible. If we only pay attention to one thing in our lives and our world, especially if it's a terrible thing that has just happened, we will never have the vision to see that something else is possible.

Carlos Santana, in reflecting on “A Love Supreme,” says that Coltrane's sound “is the sound of light and the sound of love.” It creates what Santana calls “a vortex of possibilities.”

The possibilities Coltrane embraced and expressed are based on his spiritual awareness that everything in the universe is connected, just as all the keys in his music are connected. This awareness leads Coltrane to the final section of the suite, titled “Psalms.” Like many of the Psalms in the Hebrew Bible, it's an expression of gratitude and praise. Coltrane wrote an accompanying poem that's included in the album's liner notes. As he describes the relationships that unite the world of our experience, Coltrane says, “Words, sounds, speech, [humanity], memory, thoughts, fears, emotions, time — all related, all made from one, all made in one.” The poem concludes, “Elation, Elegance, Exultation — all from God. Thank you, God. Amen.”

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, we should use this holiday season as a reminder to acknowledge everything that's present in our lives and our world. Yes, there are some brutally wicked people in our world who continue to perpetrate horrifically tragic devastation and destruction. Their actions have shaken us all to the core, and we continue to mourn the consequences of their actions, which will endure always.

At the same time, we can also see much beauty and goodness in the world around us — both in nature and in human nature. We see people acting courageously, selflessly, and tirelessly. These actions create possibilities for change that we must also acknowledge. After something terrible happens, something always comes next. There's a chance it may be wonderful. We live in a vortex of possibility.

Whether we are inspired by Coltrane's “A Love Supreme” or by some other source, it's essential for us to pause from time to time to renew our experience of being

connected to everything: all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible — an experience I call, not unlike Coltrane, the experience of God.

This awareness keeps us focused. We acknowledge what's present and what's possible in our lives and our world. We resolve to do what we can to change things for the better. We pursue a richer, fuller, and more productive life with as much diligence and discipline as we can muster. Acknowledge, resolve, pursue: it's how the present gets transformed into a better future.

Along the way, and especially today, don't forget to breathe a psalm of gratitude for all the good things in your life. Gathered here on this autumn Sunday, embraced by the peace of this sanctuary, surrounded by the love of kindred spirits, we are blessed beyond measure. This is the season for Thanksgiving.