

## Gun control: If she had a gun

Written by Todd Steven Burroughs  
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COLLEGE PARK, Md.—We all know those words from Martin Luther King on April 3, 1968—almost as well as we know the climax to the "I Have A Dream Speech." The ones about the difficult days ahead he won't see and the mountaintop he won't climb. We know that less than 24 hours after those words—uttered inside a building holding back a thunderstorm in Memphis, Tenn., at a mass meeting to support striking garbage workers—Martin Luther King's blood spills and pours all over America, pushing the nation towards justice.

But the more I deal with the Newtown, Mass. tragedy, now a month in, I began to think about King's words right before that in the same speech.

When I saw President Obama this past Wednesday read the letter from Julia Stokes, 11, a young white girl, then turn to tell her "Julia, I will try very hard" to do something on gun control, it reminded me of another letter King read to that crowd in Memphis before he went into his final self-eulogizing.

That letter was also from a young white girl, a ninth grader. She said that she was glad King didn't sneeze after when he was stabbed near his heart in 1958 in Harlem, signing copies of his first book, "Stride Toward Freedom." Doctors had said if he had sneezed, the blade would have punctured his aorta, and he would have died.

In that last speech, King does a great riff off the letter, talking about how if he had sneezed, he would have missed the student-sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the Albany, Birmingham and Selma campaigns for an end to segregation and the right to vote. Climaxing the point to great cheers and applause, he declared: "If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been in Memphis to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze."

We are, too.

But let's go a little earlier in the speech, to the stabbing:

"You know, several years ago, I was in New York City autographing the first book that I had written. And while sitting there autographing books, a demented black woman came up. The only question I heard from her was, 'Are you Martin Luther King?' And I was looking down writing, and I said, 'Yes.' And the next minute I felt something beating on my chest. Before I knew it I had been stabbed by this demented woman."

The woman's name was Izola Ware Curry. She stabbed him with a steel letter opener.

Why? Because she was mentally ill.

Like Adam Lanza, a name we now all know, forever linked with the Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Like Seung-Hui Cho, from the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting.

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So when we think about how hard we are going to have to push those in Congress to ignore the National Rifle Association and its lobbyists, or gun zealots in red and blue states, we can ponder the past as well as the present.

Because if Curry had had a gun, we'd all be at work on Monday in a very different, very diminished America.

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