Messages Following the Stabbing

On 20 September 1958 Izola Curry, a mentally disturbed black woman, stabbed King with a letter opener as he signed copies of Stride Toward Freedom, at a Harlem department store. Following the assault, he received a deluge of mail and telegrams, including this correspondence recently acquired by the King Papers Project from United Nations under-secretary general Ralph J. Bunche and civil rights advocate Ruth H. Bunch, vice president Richard M. Nixon, author John Steinbeck, and entertainer Harry Belafonte. Steinbeck states, "You are very valuable to our whole perplexed and anxious species. Get well quickly. We need you, for you too are an accident—one of those fortunate accidents that have permitted us to survive our stupitudes and our blundering."

From Ruth H. and Ralph J. Bunche

20 September 1958
Kew Gardens, N Y

Dr Martin Luther King = Harlem Hospital Patient =

We are confident that your great spiritual as well as physical strength, and your courage, will lead you to a speedy recovery. Stop Please accept our deep sympathy and warmest good wishes. Stop =

Ruth and Ralph Bunche

PWS: CSKC

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1 For more on King’s stabbing and recovery, see Introduction, in Papers 4:34–35
2 Upon his 24 October return to Montgomery, King acknowledged “the vast outpouring of sympathy and affection that came to me literally from everywhere—from Negro and white, from Catholic, Protestant and Jew, from the simple, the uneducated, the [celebrities] and the great” (King, Statement Upon Return to Montgomery, 24 October 1958, in Papers 4:513–514).
3 Ralph J. Bunche, the first African American Nobel Peace Prize winner, and his wife, Ruth, had been King’s supporters since the Montgomery bus boycott. Ralph Bunche contributed to a fund used to defray King’s expenses following his stabbing (see note 1, King to A. Philip Randolph, 8 November 1958, in Papers 4:527). Ruth Bunche served as a co-chair for the Youth March for Integrated Schools on 25 October 1958, held during King’s convalescence (see note 1 to King, Address at Youth March for Integrated Schools in Washington, D.C., Delivered by Coretta Scott King, in Papers 4:514).
My dear Reverend King:

The knowledge that you are flooded with messages does not diminish my wish to add a few drops to the torrent.

When the news came of your accident, and it was an accident, as you were the first to point out, I found myself bewildered and angry. Your sacrifice is obvious, but I and many others know your importance to whole peoples. Having erred in ethics and morals as well as in judgment, we react as my little boys sometime do when they are being bad. After a mistake they put their chairs and search for another to justify the guilt. You have shown the good, and more important, the practical way—in fact the only possible way.

After my first confusion and anger, I knew as you must have known from the first, that destiny sometimes uses strange instruments, in this case a sad and troubled woman. But who could have foreseen that the raging of the fire as a deterrent to civil unrest would become the symbol of love and a flag of truce in a world of hatred?

Your accident provides a climate for evaluation and recreation. I am sorry for your pain but very sure that you accept it as a part of the pattern without which no human steps toward dignity and understanding are ever taken.
You are very valuable to our work performed and annals of species. Get well quickly. We need you for your own and our assessment of things possible. Accidents that have permitted us to humiliate our character and our blundering.

Yours gratefully,

[Signature]