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Dear Wesleyan Classmates,

It was uproariously funny. Stationed above the forest of sparkling Christmas trees, each decorated like a Fifth Avenue store window, the air redolent with fir and pine, Dr. Ruth Westheimer, Harvey Fierstein and I fought to raise money from the hard-partying crowd for a cause that never had enough. With no rehearsal, tripping over each other's lines, we conducted, as best we could, an auction of those glittering trees. I had the benefit of being a real auctioneer. Dr. Ruth and Fierstein had been deputized as my assistants and were definitely learning on the job. Dr. Ruth would interject homilies and Harvey would yell at the bidders. It was utter chaos and absurdly silly. But it worked. That was more than 30 years ago and every event had to work. That was the time of AIDS, the plague years. We got through it and eventually wrestled AIDS to a kind of draw.

ALS has never been cured nor wrestled to a draw. I know. I have the disease. I will never conduct an auction to benefit ALS research and care. My voice has almost gone. I will never climb into a podium. I can no longer walk. But this strange disease of the motor neurons wastes the body but spares the mind. Because my physical world has shrunk the world of my mind has grown in importance. Meetings, dinners, gatherings, foreign travel are now impossible, so I write daily. Decades of my private *Diary of a Sotheby's Auctioneer* are now being edited, expanded and categorized and that process will continue until physical corruption overwhelms the mind's determination.

It is curious that so many words—well beyond one million, could be written about only one facet of what I conceive to have been a charmed existence. But the auction house, that intersection of lust and folly, of frozen loveliness and perpetual transition, of the searingly beautiful and the historically searing (the vault next to my Sotheby's office for months juxtaposed nine Faberge Imperial Easter Eggs with the papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.), was an irresistible vantage point from which to peer into the hidden corners of human existence. Over 41 years I must have sold almost a million lots. But it is never the lots that mattered so much as the

stories they told—from space ships to dinosaurs, from Magna Carta to Rosebud, from Gilbert Stuart’s Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington to George Catlin’s portraits of American Indians, from the jewels of the Duchess of Windsor to the collections of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and, along the way, the most expensive book, stamp, coin, medal and document in the world, all told stories as random as shells cast from the sea until fitted together thrillingly into a common language.

In our strength we can be exceedingly weak and in our weakness astonishingly strong. We have an infinite capacity to misunderstand ourselves and the courage and clarity to take a second look. Living is so much more than science and medicine. But science and medicine have allocated the living a little more time. To use life well and fruitfully is our duty. To extend the fruitful life allows a few more days in which to redeem ourselves.

ALS may be the fate of a handful—although that random handful could include anyone. But the interrelated diseases of Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s and MS will ensnare so many more of us.

And now to the purpose of this letter. My family has created a fund, the David Redden ALS Fund, at Columbia University, to support research into ALS, neuron diseases and the work of the Eleanor and Lou Gehrig ALS Center. We ask you to consider a gift to this Fund which we will ensure is used wisely. The accompanying statement from Columbia University describes the extraordinary work of Dr. Neil Schneider and his team.

If only such letters would never have to be written!

With love and appreciation to all whose lives have intersected with mine,

David