Dear Einstein Community:

On Saturday, we awoke to the news that our nation had lost John Lewis, who had announced this past December that he was battling stage IV pancreatic cancer. Congressman Lewis was one of our most prominent and valued leaders in the fight for equality and justice. At a time when we are again struggling to overcome the structural racism that made the Civil Rights Movement necessary, his death is a crushing blow.

I still feel hopeful, however, as I've spent the weekend reflecting on all John Lewis has given us throughout his lifetime—which includes standing up to racism and injustice, and showing us how to peacefully, yet persistently, push for what's right, while also encouraging us to abide by our better angels. For as he stated earlier this year, “...We cannot give up now. We cannot give in. We must keep the faith, keep our eyes on the prize.”

The prize is one he championed for nearly 65 years. From desegregating lunch counters in Nashville to leading the Freedom Riders; from joining Dr. Martin Luther King in the quest for civil rights; to marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama—where he almost lost his life; all the way to the halls of Congress, where he was known as its Conscience. In everything he did, John Lewis made America a better place.

That we still have a ways to go does not mean failure; it means that we must continue to make progress, following his example and fortitude. For even as laws and policies systematically seek to deprive Blacks of their rights and are an ongoing source of great disappointment, John Lewis believed in the principles upon which our nation was founded. His actions and contributions consistently sought to dismantle all that was unjust.
He would say: “...choose confrontation wisely, but when it is your time, don’t be afraid to stand up, speak up, and speak out against injustice.” These are wise words that we must follow as we undertake the challenges ahead.

While there will not be another John Lewis, his influence, courage, and faith can help guide us. Looking at our students and their efforts to address issues of racial injustice at our own institution and beyond, it is clear that John Lewis has inspired a generation of new leaders, who will take on the fight for freedom, equality, and social justice. Through an honest appraisal of recent events and our country’s history, we can address the injustices we see and stand up for our fellow citizens, who still suffer from mistreatment and inequity. Their plight is, and should be, our own.

As a parting thought, if you haven't seen the recently released documentary “John Lewis: Good Trouble,” I highly recommend watching it. The film reveals the full measure of his many courageous acts and contributions, which can continue to inspire us as we carry the fight forward to eliminate systemic racism.

If there's just one thing you do to honor the memory of John Lewis, make sure you are registered to vote in the November election and that you exercise that right. As he says at the film's conclusion, “The vote is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have.”

Sincerely,

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