I was at university at the time of the massacre that took place in China’s Tiananmen Square in 1989 — I was the same age as many of those who stood up to the tanks, soldiers and mighty military apparatus of the Chinese government. I remember being in awe of their bravery, particularly that of the young man standing his ground in front of an enormous armoured tank, an image that became iconic when it was broadcast around the globe.

‘How could he do that?’ I remember asking myself at the time, completely unable to imagine myself being so courageous. And I think it’s fair to say, I never have been.

But there are many ways you can be brave. Few make the headlines. Few earn medals. Fewer still make the cover of *Time* magazine. However, every act of bravery stems from a decision to make a stand for something that’s bigger than yourself and more important than your emotional safety, comfort or pride.

If you’ve grown up in a democracy that respects civil liberties and freedom of speech then you’ve likely never felt compelled to risk your life for the greater good. Consider
yourself fortunate. But regardless of your good fortune in life — or lack thereof — we’re all called to make a stand for something: for the values we care about, for the difference we want to make, for the causes we believe in and for the injustice we don’t. Those of us born with rights and freedoms millions only dream of have an even greater obligation to do so.

WHEN YOU’RE UNCLEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU STAND FOR, YOU CAN FALL EASILY ONTO THE PATH OF CAUTIOUS, COMFORTABLE MEDIOCRITY.

Of course, it’s so easy to unintentionally find yourself living on autopilot. We think we’re in charge of our thoughts and behaviours, but so often we’re operating from habit, reacting unconsciously to perceived threats to our security and station. Fear steers us away from risk and towards safety — or at least the illusion of it. Which is why, unless you’re clear about what you want your life to stand for, it’s all too easy to fall mindlessly into the path of least resistance, maximum self-interest and minimal contribution. Unfortunately, that path rarely leads anywhere worth travelling. It almost certainly contributes little to the welfare of others, which is always the richest source of satisfaction in our own lives.

Deciding to make a stand for something bigger than yourself is indispensable for living bravely. While you may never be called to lay your life on the line, start a movement or end an unjust regime, every day there are opportunities for you to lay your pride on the line for a more important cause. Sometimes your courage will be rewarded — your risk will pay off, you’ll get the job, land the date, win the client, resolve the issue, close the sale, earn the rise. Other times it won’t. But who you become by the courage you’ve shown will always leave you better off. Stronger. Smarter. Braver. Bolder.
KNOWING WHAT YOU STAND FOR IS THE FOUNDATION STONE UPON WHICH BRAVERY IS BUILT.

Each time you make a stand for something you believe in, you make an unspoken, but profoundly important, declaration to those around you — and, most importantly, to yourself:

*I'm the author of my life, and not a passive spectator watching life play out before me. My life matters, my voice matters and my choices matter. I will not cower to conformity. I will not surrender to self-doubt. I have a role to play, a difference to make and I'm committed to living my truth, standing for what is right and against what isn't.*

In her book *My Story*, former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard wrote that it was her strong sense of purpose that fuelled her determination to enter politics and then sustained her throughout her three turbulent years leading Australia. Upon asking her to share her thoughts for my *Forbes* column to honour International Women’s Day the following year, she replied, ‘Changing the world, like living your own life well, requires a sense of purpose, the courage to pursue it and the preparedness to risk the most public of failures’. Indeed, Julia ultimately experienced just that. But by having the courage to make a stand for something, she made a far more meaningful impact on her country and the world than she would ever have done otherwise.

Sure, we may not all feel called to enter politics, but there are things that you, and only you, can do; things that will never be done if you don’t do them. Making a stand for what’s most important to you in this one and only precious life of yours requires letting go excuses and owning your power. It means giving up stories that suggest you aren’t good enough and daring to believe that you have everything it takes to live a life that truly matters, and to leave a legacy that lasts.
Your life, like my own, is ultimately very short. Knowing what you stand for is your testimony to the world and the only thing that will compel you to step beyond your comfort zone as many times as you need to honour all that you are, all that you can be and the difference that you alone can make.

**Train the brave**

Knowing what you stand for in your work, in your family and in the world is crucial for living a truly meaningful life. So take a moment to get clear about (or simply to reconnect with) what you want your life to stand for. Write it down (it makes a difference!). Include the impact you want to make on those you live with, work with and encounter throughout the course of your life. Mahatma Ghandi said, ‘My life is my message’. What message do you want your life to say between now and the day you die?