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A Matter of Life or Death

COLLECTION 5

A Matter of Life or Death

"To endure what is unendurable is true endurance."

—Japanese proverb

MEMOIR

from An Ordinary Man — **Paul Rusesabagina**

SPEECH

Truth at All Costs — **Marie Colvin**

Poems About Survival

POEM

The Survivor — **Marilyn Chin**

POEM

Who Understands Me But Me — **Jimmy Santiago Baca**

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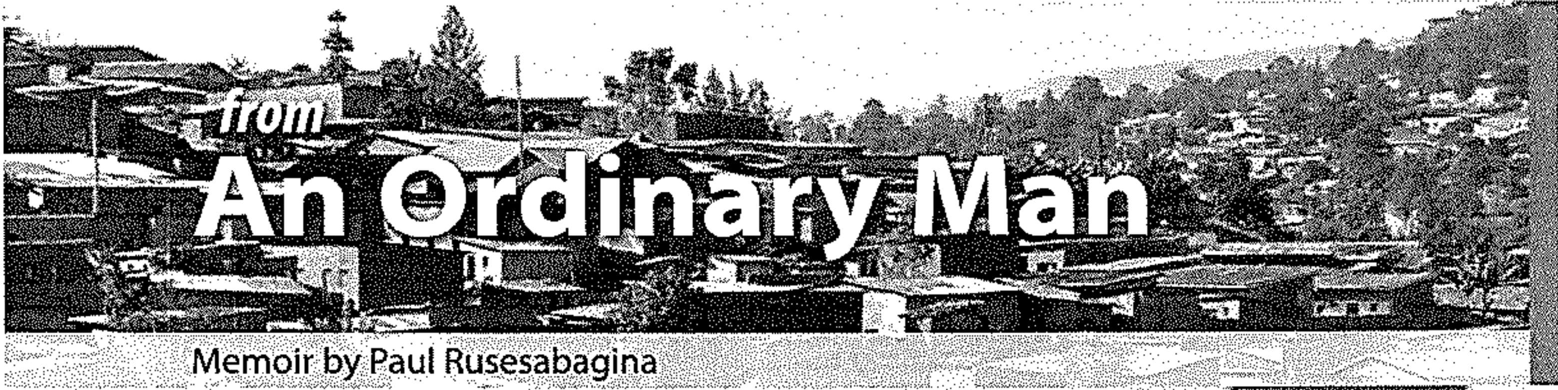
Background *In 1994, a mass genocide took place in the East African state of Rwanda when Hutus killed 800,000 men, women, and children over a period of 100 days. Although tensions existed between the Hutus and Tutsis (the two main ethnic groups in Rwanda) for hundreds of years, things came to a head on April 6, 1994, when a plane carrying the President of Rwanda, a Hutu, was shot down. Many perceived this as an attack by Tutsis, and the tensions between the two groups escalated into full-blown violence.* **Paul Rusesabagina** *lived through the genocide and wrote about the horrors in his memoir* An Ordinary Man *(from which this excerpt comes), which later became the film* Hotel Rwanda.



from An Ordinary Man

Memoir by Paul Rusesabagina

1. READ ▶ As you read lines 1–43, begin to cite text evidence.
   - Underline the actions Rusesabagina took when the genocide broke out.
   - In the margin, explain what Rusesabagina has trouble understanding (lines 4–24).
   - Circle words and phrases that convey a tone of disgust and horror.

My name is Paul Rusesabagina. I am a hotel manager. In April 1994, when a wave of mass murder broke out in my country, I was able to hide 1,268 people inside the hotel where I worked.

When the militia and the Army came with orders to kill my guests, I took them into my office, treated them like friends, offered them beer and cognac, and then persuaded them to neglect their task that day. And when they came back, I poured more drinks and kept telling them they should leave in peace once again. It went on like this for seventy-six days. I was not particularly **eloquent** in these conversations. They were no different from the words I would have used in saner times to order a shipment of pillow-cases, for example, or tell the shuttle van driver to pick up a guest at the airport. I still don't understand why those men in the militias didn't just put a bullet in my head and execute every last person in the rooms upstairs but they didn't. None of the refugees in my hotel were killed. Nobody was beaten. Nobody was taken away and made to disappear. People were being hacked to death with machetes all over Rwanda, but that five-story building

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eloquent:

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CLOSE READ Notes

prevailed:

became a refuge for anyone who could make it to our doors. The hotel could offer only an illusion of safety, but for whatever reason, the illusion **prevailed** and I survived to tell the story, along with those I sheltered. There was nothing particularly heroic about it. My only pride in the matter is that I stayed at my post and continued to do my job as manager when all other aspects of decent life vanished. I kept the Hotel Mille Collines open, even as the nation descended into chaos and eight hundred thousand people were butchered by their friends, neighbors, and countrymen.

It happened because of racial hatred. Most of the people hiding in my hotel were Tutsis, descendants of what had once been the ruling class of Rwanda. The people who wanted to kill them were mostly Hutus, who were traditionally farmers. The usual stereotype is that Tutsis are tall and thin with delicate noses, and Hutus are short and stocky with wider noses, but most people in Rwanda fit neither description. This divide is mostly artificial, a leftover from history, but people take it very seriously, and the two groups have been living uneasily alongside each other for more than five hundred years.

You might say the divide also lives inside me. I am the son of a Hutu farmer and his Tutsi wife. My family cared not the least bit about this when I was growing up, but since bloodlines are passed through the father in Rwanda, I am technically a Hutu. I married a Tutsi woman, whom I love with a fierce passion, and we had a child of mixed descent together. This type of blended family is typical in Rwanda, even with our long history of racial prejudice. Very often we can't tell each other apart just by looking at one another. But the difference between Hutu and Tutsi means everything in Rwanda. In the late spring and early summer of 1994 it meant the difference between life and death.

2. REREAD Reread lines 25–43. How do Rusesabagina's words convey his feelings about the division between Hutus and Tutsis? What is his purpose in describing his family when explaining these differences? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

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Between April 6, when the plane of President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down with a missile, and July 4, when the Tutsi rebel army captured the capital of Kigali, approximately eight hundred thousand Rwandans were slaughtered. This is a number that cannot be grasped with the rational mind. It is like trying—all at once—to understand that the earth is surrounded by billions of balls of gas just like our sun across a vast
50 blackness. You cannot understand the magnitude. Just try! Eight hundred thousand lives snuffed out in one hundred days. That's eight thousand lives a day. More than five lives per *minute*. Each one of those lives was like a little world in itself. Some person who laughed and cried and ate and thought and felt and hurt just like any other person, just like you and me. A mother's child, every one irreplaceable.

And the way they died . . . I can't bear to think about it for long. Many went slowly from slash wounds, watching their own blood gather in pools in the dirt, perhaps looking at their own severed limbs, oftentimes with the screams of their parents or their children or their husbands in their cars.
60 Their bodies were cast aside like garbage, left to rot in the sun, shoveled into mass graves with bulldozers when it was all over. It was not the largest genocide in the history of the world, but it was the fastest and most efficient.

At the end, the best you can say is that my hotel saved about four hours' worth of people. Take four hours away from one hundred days and you have an idea of just how little I was able to accomplish against the grand design.

3. **READ ▶** As you read lines 44–73, continue to cite evidence.
   - Underline words or phrases that convey Rusesabagina's tone.
   - In the margin, describe the tone of each paragraph.
   - Circle the resources Rusesabagina used to save the people hiding at the hotel.

4. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 44–55. What is Rusesabagina's purpose in these lines?

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What did I have to work with? I had a five-story building. I had a cooler full of drinks. I had a small stack of cash in the safe. And I had a working telephone and I had my tongue. It wasn't much. Anybody with a gun or a machete could have taken these things away from me quite easily. My disappearance—and that of my family—would have barely been noticed in the torrents of blood coursing through Rwanda in those months. Our bodies would have joined the thousands in the east-running rivers floating toward Lake Victoria, their skins turning white with water rot.

I wonder today what exactly it was that allowed me to stop the killing clock for four hours.

There were a few things in my favor, but they do not explain everything. I was a Hutu because my father was Hutu, and this gave me a certain amount of protection against immediate execution. But it was not only Tutsis who were slaughtered in the genocide; it was also the thousands of moderate Hutus who were suspected of sympathizing with or even helping the Tutsi "cockroaches." I was certainly one of these cockroach-lovers. Under the standards of mad extremism at work then I was a prime candidate for a beheading.

Another surface advantage: I had control of a luxury hotel, which was one of the few places during the genocide that had the image of being protected by soldiers. But the important word in that sentence is *image.* In the opening days of the slaughter, the United Nations had left four unarmed soldiers staying at the hotel as guests. This was a symbolic gesture. I was also able to bargain for the service of five Kigali policemen. But I knew these men were like a wall of tissue paper standing between us and a flash flood.

Yet another of my advantages was a very strange one. I knew many of the architects of the genocide and had been friendly with them. It was, in a way, part of my job. I was the general manager of a hotel called the Diplomates, but I was eventually asked to take charge of a sister property, the nearby Hotel Mille Collines, where most of the events described in this book took place. The Mille Collines was *the* place in Kigali where the power

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5. READ ▶ As you read lines 74–109, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline the advantages Rusesabagina had at the time of the genocide.
- In the margin, explain why the word "image" is important in line 85.
- Circle two instances in which Rusesabagina mentions being at risk.

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> "I wonder today what exactly it was that allowed me to stop the killing clock for four hours."

classes of Rwanda came to meet Western businessmen and dignitaries. Before the killing started I had shared drinks with most of these men, 100 served them complimentary plates of lobster, lit their cigarettes. I knew the names of their wives and their children. I had stored up a large bank of favors. I cashed them all in—and then borrowed heavily—during the genocide. My preexisting friendship with General Augustin Bizimungu in particular helped save the Mille Collines from being raided many times over. But **alliances** always shift, particularly in the chaos of war, and I knew my supply of liquor and favors would run dry in some crucial quarters. Before the hundred days were over a squad of soldiers was dispatched to kill me. I survived only after a desperate half hour during which I called in even more favors.

alliance:

110 All these things helped me during the genocide. But they don't explain everything.

Let me tell you what I think was the most important thing of all.

I will never forget walking out of my house the first day of the killings. There were people in the streets who I had known for seven years, neighbors of mine who had come over to our place for our regular Sunday cookouts. These people were wearing military uniforms that had been handed out by the militia. They were holding machetes and were trying to get inside the houses of those they knew to be Tutsi, those who had Tutsi relatives, or those who refused to go along with the murders.

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6. **REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 76–109. In a small group, discuss what else might have helped Rusesabagina survive the genocide.

7. **READ** As you read lines 110–145, continue to cite textual evidence.
   - In the margin, explain why Rusesabagina included the story about Peter.
   - Underline text describing the "words" people had heard causing them to go "mad."

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120 There was one man in particular whom I will call Peter, though that is not his real name. He was a truck driver, about thirty years old, with a young wife. The best word I can use to describe him is an American word: *cool.* Peter was just a cool guy; so nice to children, very gentle, kind of a kidder, but never mean with his humor. I saw him that morning wearing a military uniform and holding a machete dripping in blood. Watching this happen in my own neighborhood was like looking up at a blue summer sky and seeing it suddenly turning to purple. The entire world had gone mad around me.

What had caused this to happen? Very simple: words.

130 The parents of these people had been told over and over again that they were uglier and stupider than the Tutsis. They were told they would never be as physically attractive or as capable of running the affairs of the country. It was a poisonous stream of rhetoric designed to reinforce the power of the elite. When the Hutus came to power they spoke evil words of their own, fanning the old resentments, exciting the hysterical dark places in the heart.

exhortation:

The words put out by radio station announcers were a major cause of the violence. There were explicit **exhortations** for ordinary citizens to break into the homes of their neighbors and kill them where they stood. Those 140 commands that weren't direct were phrased in code language that everybody understood: "Cut the tall trees. Clean your neighborhood. Do your duty." The names and addresses of targets were read over the air. If a person was able to run away his position and direction of travel were broadcast and the crowd followed the chase over the radio like a sports event.

8. **REREAD** Reread lines 137–145. How does calling the hunt for Tutsis a "sports event" convey the tone of the narrative?

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> “Words . . . can also be powerful tools of life.”

The avalanche of words celebrating racial supremacy and encouraging people to do their duty created an alternate reality in Rwanda for those three months. It was an atmosphere where the insane was made to seem normal and disagreement with the mob was fatal.

150 Rwanda was a failure on so many levels. It started as a failure of the European colonists who exploited trivial differences for the sake of a divide-and-rule strategy. It was the failure of Africa to get beyond its ethnic divisions and form true coalition governments. It was a failure of Western democracies to step in and avert the catastrophe when abundant evidence was available. It was a failure of the United States for not calling a genocide by its right name. It was the failure of the United Nations to live up to its commitments as a peacemaking body.

All of these come down to a failure of words. And this is what I want to tell you: Words are the most effective weapons of death in man's **arsenal.**

arsenal:

160 But they can also be powerful tools of life. They may be the only ones.

Today I am convinced that the only thing that saved those 1,268 people in my hotel was words. Not the liquor, not money, not the UN. Just ordinary words directed against the darkness. They are so important. I used words in many ways during the genocide—to plead, intimidate, coax, cajole, and negotiate. I was slippery and evasive when I needed to be. I acted friendly toward despicable people. I put cartons of champagne into their car trunks. I flattered them shamelessly. I said whatever I thought it would take to keep the people in my hotel from being killed. I had no cause to advance, no ideology to promote beyond that one simple goal. Those words were my

170 connection to a saner world, to life as it ought to be lived.

I am not a politician or a poet. I built my career on words that are plain and ordinary and concerned with everyday details. I am nothing more or

9. READ ▶ As you read lines 146–179, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline the reasons given for Rwanda's failure.
- Circle the biggest failure that led to the genocide.
- Underline the reasons Rusesabagina gives for his actions.

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less than a hotel manager, trained to negotiate contracts and charged to give shelter to those who need it. My job did not change in the genocide, even though I was thrust into a sea of fire. I only spoke the words that seemed normal and sane to me. I did what I believed to be the ordinary things that an ordinary man would do. I said no to outrageous actions the way I thought that anybody would, and it still mystifies me that so many others could say yes.

10. REREAD Reread lines 158–160. What does Rusesabagina mean when he says that words are powerful tools of life, that they "may be the only ones"?

SHORT RESPONSE

Cite Text Evidence What is Rusesabagina's purpose in writing his book? What is the significance of the book's title, *An Ordinary Man*? Be sure to review your reading notes and **cite text evidence** in your response.

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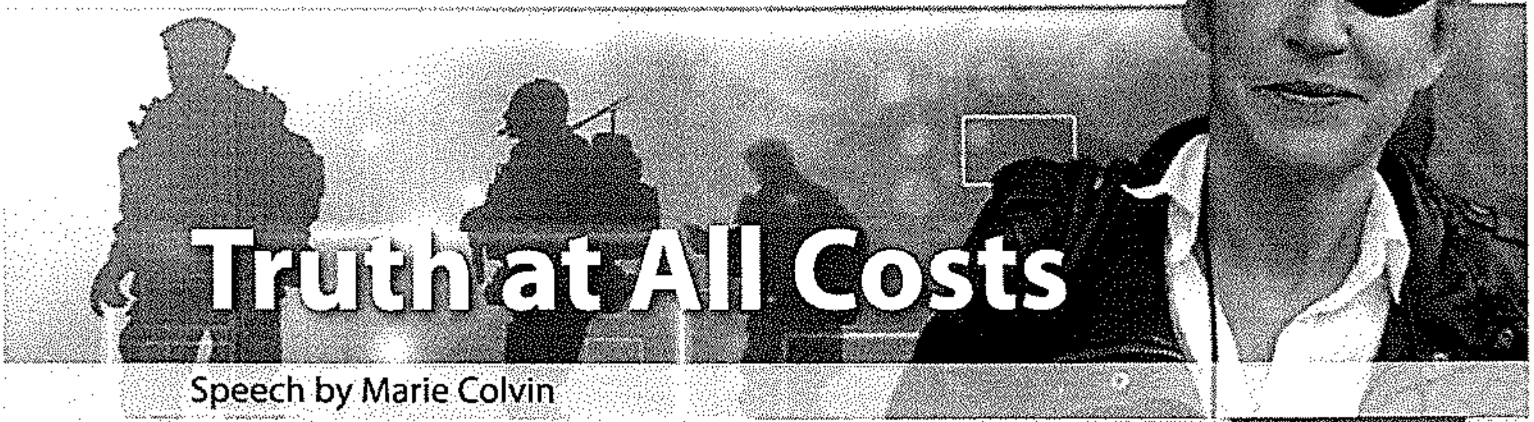
Background *The award-winning journalist* **Marie Colvin** *(1956–2012) spent most of her professional life as the Middle East war correspondent for the British newspaper* The Sunday Times. *A fearless reporter, Colvin reported directly from war zones. In Tamil-Tiger-held Sri Lanka, she was hit by shrapnel and lost the use of her left eye. In 2012, while reporting on the shelling of civilians in Syria, Colvin and a French photojournalist were killed in a rocket attack. At her memorial, she was called "the bravest of the brave." She gave the following speech in 2010 to honor journalists who had died in war zones.*



Truth at All Costs

Speech by Marie Colvin

1. READ ▶ As you read lines 1–20, begin to collect and cite evidence.
   - Underline text explaining the reason for Colvin's speech.
   - Circle lines describing what it means to cover a war.
   - In the margin, paraphrase the claim Colvin makes about the "mission" of war correspondents (lines 12–20).

Your Royal Highness, ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured and humbled to be speaking to you at this service tonight to remember the journalists and their support staff who gave their lives to report from the war zones of the 21st century. I have been a war correspondent for most of my professional life. It has always been a hard calling. But the need for frontline, objective reporting has never been more compelling.

Covering a war means going to places torn by chaos, destruction and death, and trying to bear witness. It means trying to find the truth in a sandstorm of **propaganda** when armies, tribes or terrorists clash. And yes, it means taking risks, not just for yourself but often for the people who work closely with you.

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propaganda:

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Despite all the videos you see from the Ministry of Defence or the Pentagon, and all the sanitised language describing smart bombs and pinpoint strikes, the scene on the ground has remained remarkably the same for hundreds of years. Craters. Burned houses. Mutilated bodies. Women weeping for children and husbands. Men for their wives, mothers children.

Our mission is to report these horrors of war with accuracy and without prejudice. We always have to ask ourselves whether the level of risk is worth the story. What is bravery, and what is **bravado**? 20

bravado:

Journalists covering combat shoulder great responsibilities and face difficult choices. Sometimes they pay the ultimate price. Tonight we honour the 49 journalists and support staff who were killed bringing the news to our shores. We also remember journalists around the world who have been wounded, maimed or kidnapped and held hostage for months. It has never been more dangerous to be a war correspondent, because the journalist in the combat zone has become a prime target.

I lost my eye in an ambush in the Sri Lankan civil war.[1] I had gone to the northern Tamil area from which journalists were banned and found an unreported humanitarian disaster. As I was smuggled back across the 30 internal border, a soldier launched a grenade at me and the shrapnel sliced into my face and chest. He knew what he was doing.

[1] **Sri Lankan civil war:** A 26-year civil war (1983–2009) between government troops and the Tamil Tigers, a minority separatist group, who fought to establish an independent state in Sri Lanka.

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2. **REREAD** Reread lines 18–20. Explain the question that Colvin is asking. What idea is she emphasizing?

3. **READ** Read lines 21–39. Circle Colvin's claim about the danger war correspondents face today. Underline the evidence she cites to support her opinion.

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NATO forces guard the scene of a suicide bomb attack against British soldiers Wednesday, January 28, 2004, in the snow in Kabul, Afganistan.

Just last week, I had a coffee in Afghanistan with a photographer friend, Joao Silva. We talked about the terror one feels and must contain when patrolling on an embed[2] with the armed forces through fields and villages in Afghanistan . . . putting one foot in front of the other, steeling yourself each step for the blast. The expectation of that blast is the stuff of nightmares. Two days after our meeting, Joao stepped on a mine and lost both legs at the knee.

40 Many of you here must have asked yourselves, or be asking yourselves now, is it worth the cost in lives, heartbreak, loss? Can we really make a difference?

[2] **embed:** traveling with an army.

4. REREAD Reread lines 33–39. How does the information Colvin gives in these lines support her argument about the danger of war reporting?

5. READ As you read lines 40–52, continue to cite evidence.

- Circle the questions Colvin asks (lines 40–42).
- Underline the question raised by the newspaper.
- In the margin, explain the newspaper's point of view (lines 43–45).

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I faced that question when I was injured. In fact one paper ran a headline saying, has Marie Colvin gone too far this time? My answer then, and now, was that it is worth it.

Today in this church are friends, colleagues and families who know exactly what I am talking about, and bear the cost of those experiences, as do their families and loved ones.

50 Today we must also remember how important it is that news organisations continue to invest in sending us out at great cost, both financial and emotional, to cover stories.

We go to remote war zones to report what is happening. The public have a right to know what our government, and our armed forces, are doing in our name. Our mission is to speak the truth to power. We send home that first rough draft of history. We can and do make a difference in exposing the horrors of war and especially the atrocities that befall civilians.

The history of our profession is one to be proud of. The first war
60 correspondent in the modern era was William Howard Russell[3] of the Times, who was sent to cover the Crimean conflict[4] when a British-led coalition fought an invading Russian army.

repatriate:

Billy Russell, as the troops called him, created a firestorm of public indignation back home by revealing inadequate equipment, scandalous treatment of the wounded, especially when they were **repatriated**—does this sound familiar?—and an incompetent high command that led to the folly of the Charge of the Light Brigade.[5] It was a breakthrough in war

[3] **William Howard Russell:** known as "Billy" Russell (1820–1907), Russell was a reporter who gained renown for his reporting on the Crimean War.

[4] **Crimean conflict:** a war (1853–1856) between the Russian Empire and an alliance of several European empires, including the British Empire; it was known as the first "modern" war.

[5] **Charge of the Light Brigade:** an ill-fated charge of British light cavalry against Russian forces during the Crimean War.

6. **REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 40–52. With a small group, discuss the questions Colvin asks and the answers she gives.

7. **READ** As you read lines 53–90, continue to cite text evidence.
   - Underline what Colvin says the public have a right to know.
   - Circle text that explains how war reporters make a difference (lines 53–57).
   - Circle text that describes what Colvin calls "the real difficulty."

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> "Our mission is to speak the truth to power."

reporting. Until then, wars were reported by junior officers who sent back dispatches to newspapers. Billy Russell went to war with an open mind, a
70 telescope, a notebook and a bottle of brandy. I first went to war with a typewriter, and learned to tap out a telex tape. It could take days to get from the front to a telephone or telex machine.

War reporting has changed greatly in just the last few years. Now we go to war with a satellite phone, laptop, video camera and a flak jacket. I point my satellite phone to south southwest in Afghanistan, press a button and I have filed.

In an age of 24/7 rolling news, blogs and Twitters, we are on constant call wherever we are. But war reporting is still essentially the same—someone has to go there and see what is happening. You can't get that
80 information without going to places where people are being shot at, and others are shooting at you. The real difficulty is having enough faith in humanity to believe that enough people be they government, military or the man on the street, will care when your file reaches the printed page, the website or the TV screen.

8. REREAD Reread lines 73–79. Explain the contradiction Colvin introduces when she discusses how war reporting has changed.

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We do have that faith because we believe we do make a difference.

And we could not make that difference—or begin to do our job—without the fixers, drivers and translators, who face the same risks and die in appalling numbers. Today we honour them as much as the front line journalists who have died in pursuit of the truth. They have kept the faith as
90 we who remain must continue to do.

9. REREAD Reread lines 81–90. What is Colvin's idea of faith? What does she say reporters need to believe in?

SHORT RESPONSE

Cite Text Evidence Explain whether or not Colvin convinced you that being a war correspondent is worth the risk. Review your reading notes, and evaluate the effectiveness of her argument. **Cite text evidence** in your response.

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