

CANINE COURAGE

The Heroism of Dogs

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Tiffin Shewmake

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To my husband, Richard Carroll

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Chapter 1

THE BELIEF IN DOG HEROISM MYTH TO REALITY

Ray was alone when he fell off the cliff. Anne, his fiancée, was a quarter mile away on the main trail. It never occurred to Ray that the area might be dangerous. The popularity of the view, apparent from the worn path leading to the overlook, provided a sense of safety. Besides, Ray did not associate wilderness dangers with the urban park. Danger came from nearby Cleveland, theft from parked cars and not falling from cliffs.

A small rocky outcropping over an 80-foot cliff provided a dramatic view of the countryside. Ray moved as close as possible to the cliff's edge to take the perfect photograph. But as he pressed the shutter, his foot slipped on the loose shale, and he plummeted to the bottom of the cliff.

Anne waited on the main trail with her dog Woodie, a medium-sized Collie mix. As usual, Woodie sniffed happily around the bushes. But shortly after Ray left them to hike to the overlook, Woodie grew restless and started whining. Though Anne tried to quiet her, Woodie only became more agitated and started pulling against the leash, trying to follow Ray.

At first Anne was irritated at Woodie's behavior and snapped at the dog. But worried by Woodie's obvious distress, she let go of the leash and Woodie bolted down the path Ray had taken. Anne followed, thinking that being worried by a dog's premonition was foolish.

At the overlook, Anne didn't see anyone and gazed around in confusion. She listened for Ray or Woodie, but the only sound

she heard was a faint rustle from the direction of the cliff. Anne moved closer, trying to see over the edge while staying as far back as possible. When she finally looked down, she was horrified. Ray lay at the foot of the cliff with his face in a small stream. Woodie, also at the cliff's bottom, was inching toward him, dragging her hind legs. Anne frantically searched for a way to reach Ray but the only route was the one Woodie had taken, straight down the precipice.

The trail to the cliff's bottom would take almost ten minutes, time that Ray did not have. But Anne saw no other option and was about to take the trail down, when she saw Woodie reaching Ray's side. As Anne watched, Woodie put her muzzle against Ray's head and pushed his face out of the water.

Both Ray and Woodie survived the ordeal. Ray had a concussion and broke bones in his back and arm. He was in the hospital for two months. Woodie had broken bones and internal injuries, and she, too, recovered. According to Anne, Woodie grew more affectionate after the accident.¹

I love hearing stories like Woodie's. Growing up, I read and reread books about heroic dogs like Lad, Buck, and Big Red. I can still recite sections from *The Call of the Wild*. Today I see many stories in the news about dogs rescuing people. The dog lover in me wants to believe these stories. Still, I have never quite been able to reconcile them with the dogs I've known. It is hard to think of my childhood buddy Flippy, a black lab mix with white toes, as a hero. Certainly he was always there to play games and comfort me, but his main interest in life was eating. This was before leash laws, and Flippy spent much of the day scouting the neighborhood for food. He often came home looking like an overstuffed sausage.

Other times I think that I can glimpse this facet of canine personality. My dog Blitz, true to his German Shepherd heritage, is the most sensitive dog I've ever owned. A harsh word can disturb him for hours; my husband and I can't argue without

upsetting him. When our next door neighbor had a stroke and lay helplessly on the kitchen floor all day long, Blitz jumped the fence into the neighbor's yard on the other side, a usual occurrence, asked to be let in their house, which was unusual and then would not leave. So maybe he sensed trouble, only didn't know how to communicate it.

As much as I wanted to believe in dogs like Woodie and accept Terhune's word that the Lad stories were true, I had doubts. When I tried to be objective about dogs, which is always difficult, stories of their heroism did not always seem realistic. In nature, animal behavior always has a practical basis; I wondered what logic motivated Woodie to jump off an eighty-foot cliff. Even if her jump made sense, how did she know to push Ray's head out of the water? Most dogs don't even realize that when on a leash they must walk on the same side of a telephone pole as their owners. If I wanted to again believe in dog heroes, like I did as a child, I would have to prove to myself that they truly exist.

I found literally hundreds of stories about dog heroes and even came across an annual dog hero contest² but perhaps more importantly, I found evidence that the behavior makes sense. Woodie helped Ray because of an ancient agreement between dogs and people. In this mutual understanding, dogs help people and in return, people help dogs. Being a valuable member of human society has guaranteed the success of the domestic dog as a species. My research led me to believe that dog heroism is real, and that the story of heroism is really the story of how the lives of two very different species have become intertwined.

Early Stories of Faithfulness and Loyalty

In addition to the reportedly true stories about heroic dogs, I found many myths about dogs. Although myths are fiction, they are a record of the dog's historical place in society and of

their behavior. The stories also reflect how people feel about dogs.

Myths arise from real behaviors and events, even though they tend to be more colorful than life. This is evident from myths about guard dogs like Cerberus, the watchdog of Hades from ancient Greece. Guarding is one of the dog's oldest and most universal behaviors so Cerberus' function is realistic even if he had three heads. I reasoned that if dog heroism is a real behavior and not fiction, then the behavior should be represented in myths.

The earliest dog myths are about faithfulness. It is impossible to write about heroism and not discuss loyalty because the traits are so closely related, and at times indistinguishable. Both loyalty and heroism strengthen the relationship dogs have with people and keep people helping dogs.

Perhaps the oldest faithful dog story is from the *Mahabharata*, a Hindu epic poem from the sixth century B.C. The main narrative of the poem relates the battle between good and evil. Krishna Vasudeva, the supreme God Vishnu himself, comes to earth as a man to help the good side, represented by the royal Pandava family, fight the demon-like Dhartarashtras for control of the Bharata kingdom. After winning the fight, the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira, the universal ruler of the land, becomes deeply troubled when he hears that Krishna has returned to heaven. He too yearns to leave the earth.

Yudhishtira, his brothers, his wife, and his dog set out walking to Mount Meru to find the Gates of Heaven. The journey is very difficult and one by one, Yudhishtira's wife and brothers die until only the old dog remains. Exhausted and in rags, Yudhishtira finally reaches the top of Mount Meru and the Gates of Heaven.

Indra, the God of Gods, opens the gates. He welcomes Yudhishtira, but says that dogs can not enter heaven.

Yudhishtira pleads with Indra, asking how can he desert his friend after all these miles. Indra's answer remains no. Yudhishtira refuses to leave his dog and sadly turns away from heaven's door. At that moment, the old hound changes into Lord Dharma, the God of Justice. Dharma praises Yudhishtira for his loyalty, welcomes him into Paradise and declares that none will sit above him.

What I like about this story is Yudhishtira's love for his dog. It is expected that the hound would stay with his owner during the difficult journey. But Yudhishtira is just as faithful as his dog, and his faithfulness is rewarded. Clearly, since ancient times, people have admired the faithfulness of dogs and recognized a special bond.

Many cultures have stories of faithful dogs. Homer included the story of a faithful dog, Argus, in his epic poem, the *Odyssey*. Argus was the warrior Ulysses' favorite dog but was left behind when Ulysses went to fight in the siege of Troy. Ulysses was gone for twenty years. He returned, an old bent man, no one recognized him, not even his wife. No one that is except for Argus. Argus, terribly neglected by Ulysses' family, was almost dead when Ulysses returned. But the old dog refused death until he saw his master once again;

He knew his Lord; he knew, and
strove to meet,
In vain he strove, to crawl and kiss his feet;
Yet (all he could) his tail, his ears, his eyes
Salute his master, and confess his joys.

Homer knew that his audience considered dogs faithful. Try picturing the impact of the story with Argus as a cat.

Argus was not the only faithful dog living in the ancient world. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder described dogs as "the most faithful and trusty companions of all others to a man."

To illustrate, Pliny included stories of faithful dogs in his thirty-seven volume book *Natural History*. One story is about Hyrcanus, a dog that joins his owner in death by leaping onto the man's funeral pyre. In another story, a dog does not abandon his owner, even after the man is killed. The owner had been arrested for crimes against the emperor and his dog remains near the jail. When the man is executed, the dog refuses to leave the body. A soldier tries to lure the dog away from the corpse with some meat, but the faithful dog takes the meat and places it in the mouth of his dead owner. The dog doesn't give up when the soldiers throw the body into the Tiberis River, but jumps in and tries to keep the body afloat.

The association of faithfulness with dogs has continued over the centuries. In 1876, a legal case resulted in one of the most beautiful tributes to dog faithfulness. The case involved a man who was sued for killing his neighbor's dog, Old Drum, for chasing his sheep. Attorney and future senator, George Vest, represented Old Drum's owner. Senator Vest based his case on the value of a dog's loyalty, and in his closing argument, made the point that the dog is our only true friend;

Gentlemen of the jury, the best friend a man has in the world may turn against him and become his enemy. His son or daughter that he has reared with loving care may prove ungrateful. Those who are nearest and dearest to us, those whom we trust with our happiness and good name may become traitors to their faith. The money that a man has he may lose... A man's reputation may be sacrificed in a moment of ill considered action. The people who are prone to fall on their knees to do us honor when success is with us may be the first to throw the stone of

malice when failure settles its clouds upon our heads.

The one absolutely unselfish friend that a man can have in this selfish world, the one that never deserts him, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous, is his dog. He will sleep on the cold ground where the wintry winds blow and the snow drives fiercely if only he may be near his master's side. He will kiss the hand that has no food to offer. He will lick the wounds and sores that come in encounter with the roughness of the world. He guards the sleep of his pauper master as if he were a prince. When all other friends desert he remains. When riches take wings and reputation falls to pieces he is as constant in his love as the sun in its journey through the heaven. If fortune drives the master forth an outcast in the world, the faithful dog asks no higher privilege than that of accompanying him, to guard against danger, to fight his enemies.

When the last scene of all comes and death takes his master in its embrace and his body is laid away in the cold ground, no matter if all other friends pursue their way, there by his grave will the noble dog be found, his head between his paws and his eyes sad, but open in alert watchfulness, faithful and true even to death.

Given the tendency to believe in dog faithfulness, it is no wonder that the jury spent no time deliberating and without leaving the jury box, found in favor of Old Drum's owner and awarded him three times the amount of money he had requested.

The theme of faithfulness continues in contemporary literature. *Lassie*, the story of a Collie's love for a boy, is one of the

most popular dog stories ever and was made into a television show and several movies. My favorite dog book, *The Call of the Wild*, is about the love of a dog.

New versions of ancient myths are also created. Recently a friend e-mailed me an update of Yudhishtira's story from the *Mahabharata*. In this version, a man finds himself walking along with his dog and realizes that he is dead and that the dog had died several years earlier. The man and dog come to beautiful pearly gates at the entrance of a golden road with a large sign saying "Heaven." The man does not enter because his dog is not allowed. Further along, they come to an old farm gate across a dirt road. The dog is welcomed here and he asks an elderly man standing at the gate where he is. The man replies, "heaven."

"But what about the pearly gates with the sign I just passed?" the man asks.

"That is really the entrance to hell," the man says, going on to explain that no one minds hell using the name heaven, because it screens out people who would abandon a faithful friend.

Early stories and myths show that faithfulness has been considered part of the dog's nature since ancient times. The stories also show that dogs have always held a special place in human society. Faithfulness is not the only canine trait found in myths; there are also many stories of heroic dogs.

Early Stories of Heroism

Many stories of dog heroism come from Europe. Hand lettered, intricately illustrated medieval books called bestiaries contain descriptions of a variety of real and imaginary animals. The Aberdeen Bestiary, written around 1200, includes a section on dogs, "No creature is more intelligent than the dog, for dogs have more understanding than other animals; they alone recognize their names and love their masters." This bestiary tells the story of King Garamentes and his rescue by a pack of hounds.

“We read that dogs have such great love for their masters, as when King Garamentes was caught by his enemies and taken into captivity, two hundred dogs went in formation through enemy lines and led him back from exile, fighting off those who resisted them.”

A thirteenth century story about the Wolfhound Beth-Gelert is another dog hero myth from Europe. Beth-Gelert was the favorite dog of Prince Llewelyn of Wales. The prince so trusted Beth-Gelert that he often left the dog to protect his infant son, a responsibility that led to Beth-Gelert's downfall. One day the prince went hunting, and as usual Beth-Gelert stayed to watch his son. Shortly after the prince left, a large wolf came into the nursery, looking for an easy meal. Beth-Gelert attacked when the wolf began stalking the baby. The dog and wolf were the same size and fought ferociously. Their battle trashed the nursery, knocked the cradle over, and dumped the baby onto the floor. Beth-Gelert, his strength almost gone, finally managed to kill the wolf.

When the prince returned from hunting, Beth-Gelert proudly ran to greet him. The prince saw the blood on Beth-Gelert's muzzle and feared the worst. He rushed to the nursery and found the overturned cradle and blood-splattered embroidered coverlet but no baby. The prince assumed that Beth-Gelert had betrayed him and without hesitation, he stabbed the dog with his sword. As Beth-Gelert died, the prince heard a sound and looked on the floor to see his son, sleeping unharmed next to the dead wolf.³

A French story about a greyhound named Guinefort is almost identical to Beth-Gelert's story. Guinefort's owner, the Lord of Villars, mistakenly kills his dog just like Prince Llewelyn killed Beth-Gelert. The main difference between the myths is that Guinefort fights a serpent instead of a wolf. To make amends for his error, Lord Villars buries Guinefort in a grove of trees and erects a marble monument in his honor.

There is some historical evidence for Guinefort's existence from the writings of a Dominican inquisitor named Stephen de Bourbon in 1235. Over time, a cult had evolved around the legend of Guinefort; the local community called him a saint and brought sick children to his grave to be healed. De Bourbon discovered the cult and was disturbed to find mothers bringing children to a dog's grave and even worse, calling the animal a saint. To stop the practice, de Bourbon had "the dead dog disinterred, and the sacred wood cut down and burnt along with the remains of the dog." His efforts were unsuccessful. The grave continued to be a shrine for sick children until the forties, when the practice disappeared in the upheaval of World War II.⁴

Myths usually develop around true events, so it is not surprising that Stephen de Bourbon found dog bones when he dug up the grave at Guinefort's shrine. And if dogs were not actually faithful and heroic, then such stories from so many cultures and times would not exist. In addition, the belief in dog heroism continues today, and current stories are practically identical to the legends told hundreds of years ago.

True Stories of Heroism

There are literally hundreds of stories about heroic dogs in newspapers, magazines, and books. When I mention I am writing a book on heroic dogs, people often volunteer their own personal stories about a dog saving a family member or friend. The existence of numerous stories helps support heroism as a real behavior. The use of anecdotal evidence to help establish facts is found in a number of fields. Scientific researchers may use stories to help identify areas for study and such evidence also influences medical practices. The safety of drugs in pregnancy often depends in part on anecdotal experiences because drugs cannot be ethically tested in pregnant women.⁵

However, this approach is not without problems. Stories

may be false, exaggerated, or the facts misinterpreted. Consider the article, "Dog Drives to Hospital When Owner Has Heart Attack in Car." According to the story, Seymour, a seven-year-old mixed breed, took over the wheel when his owner, Ernest Nulty, suffered a heart attack. Fortunately, as he collapsed, Mr. Nulty engaged the cruise control at fifteen miles per hour. Quick thinking Seymour drove his owner to the veterinarian's office. He maneuvered the car into the parking lot and ran into a curb, which stopped the car. The staff heard the crash, ran out to the lot and were able to save Mr. Nulty. The article includes quotes from eyewitnesses of the startling event. According to police, "We also don't know how far he drove, though we received a call from a lady who said she saw the dog at Sixth Avenue and Birch Street, which is almost a mile from where he ended up." The veterinarian's nurse was "understandably shocked when she saw Seymour driving into the clinic's parking lot."

There are some problems with Seymour's story. The first is the source. The article appeared in the *Sun*, a London tabloid. Another is the photograph of Seymour that illustrates the article. In the picture, Seymour is sitting alertly in the front seat of a car, his paws on the steering wheel. The car pictured is an original Volkswagen Bug, a car never equipped with cruise control. And even if the car did have cruise control, it does not operate below thirty miles per hour.

Other stories that are not as obvious as Seymour's are still flawed. Some have accurate facts but faulty conclusions. This may come from the desire for a good story, or from the assumption that if a dog appears to act like a person, then the motivation is similar. In 1946, the *New York Times* ran an article about a Milwaukee dog titled, "Grateful Setter Beats Out Fire." I have no difficulty accepting that this incident happened, but I am not so sure that the Setter is a hero:

Lady, a black setter, proved how grateful she was to 17-year-old Don Sherman who took her out of the city kennels a few months ago and gave her a home. Sherman's mother, Mrs. Harry Sherman, left the house yesterday. When she returned, she found Lady barking frantically behind the living-room davenport: A frayed lamp-cord had set fire to the rug. The fire was out, but blackened patches on the floor and baseboard still smoldered. Lady's paws were singed.

Lady may have put out the fire and saved the house from burning. But without witnesses, we don't know whether she singed her paws by stamping out the fire or from walking through the burned patches. Yet the paper concluded that not only did Lady save the house, but that she was motivated by her gratefulness at being adopted.

Another question one must ask is what actually makes an action heroic. There are many stories about dogs alerting their owners to fire. Barking at the smell of smoke says more to me about the dog's ability to smell than heroism. A story about a Siberian Husky-Labrador Retriever mix describes Nikisha as heroic and brave, and her "simple act" as "extraordinary." The dog was also inducted into the South Carolina Hall of Fame. Nikisha's "extraordinary act" was to bark and jump on her owner when a fire broke out in their home.⁶ Nikisha may have saved her owner's life (and her own) but was she heroic? Just compare her actions to a dog whose heroism is unassailable.

Budweiser, a Saint Bernard owned by the Carters in South Carolina, risked his life to save his owner's grandchildren. The grandchildren were visiting when an explosion sent flames through the house. Budweiser was in the yard at the time, but instead of staying safe, he ran into the burning house. He grabbed one of

the grandchildren, Linda, by the skirt and pulled her out of the house and into the neighbor's yard. He then reentered the burning house, took five-year-old Joyce by the arm and led her outside. Budweiser is a true hero.⁷

I found a number of articles written about dogs dying after reentering empty burning houses. According to the stories, these dogs were trying to save someone they thought remained in the house. Flash, a Bulldog in Monterey, Massachusetts alerted his family to a fire but then "perished in the flames in a vain attempt to find his master, who was in Pittsfield at that time."⁸ It cannot be known if Flash forgot his owner's absence or if he panicked and ran mindlessly back into the house like a horse fighting to stay in a burning barn. The writer of the article does not question Flash's motives, and perhaps he is correct, as other stories seem to support the heroism of such action.

In 1929, five-year-old Harvey Reinert was left alone when his foster parents went shopping. Neighbors noticed a fire at the house and called the fire department. Before the firemen arrived, the neighbors broke down a door and a dog ran out. The neighbors started to enter the house to look for the boy, and the dog went back in with them. The flames grew too hot and forced the neighbors out, but the dog remained. Harvey must have been terrified when he saw the fire and the flames blocked his escape. But he did not die alone. The firemen found Harvey's charred body with his dog clutched in his arms.⁹

The Similarity of Stories over Time

After rejecting obviously untrue stories and ones that didn't seem especially heroic, I still had hundreds of stories about dogs saving lives. The similarity of the behavior over time made me believe in the veracity of these stories. In most cases, I found that the dog's behavior was related to an instinct such as pack behavior or to specialized responses from the breed's function.

Almost all dog rescues involve four actions: protecting, alert-

ing, removing from danger, and getting help. These actions or combination of actions are used in five types of situations: finding a lost or injured person, protecting from an attacking animal or person, saving from drowning, alerting to dangers such as fire, carbon monoxide, or tornadoes, and protecting from a speeding vehicle.

Ever since man invented the wheel, it seems that dogs have been around to push people out of the way of speeding vehicles. Early stories involve runaway carriages and horses, later ones involve cars, but the dog's actions are the same. The dog sees the speeding vehicle, and risks its life to save the person. The following stories from 1935, 1941 and 1987, are as similar as the stories of Beth-Gelert and Guinefort. The first story is about Irma, a Rottweiler who was imported from Germany by Arthur Lockwood. Lockwood was in the habit of taking a walk with Irma every evening. One foggy night as they walked along the road, a truck careened around the corner and headed straight for Lockwood. Irma jumped on her owner and pushed him to safety just as the truck passed. The margin was so close that the truck hit Irma and broke her legs, one so badly that it had to be amputated.¹⁰

The second story includes a little boy, a Terrier named Tippy, and a train. Other than the details, this story could be Irma's. On the day of the accident, Tippy was roaming around with his buddy, seven-year-old Alvin Johnson. Alvin stopped to play on some train tracks and didn't notice an approaching train. But Tippy did, and just as the train bore down on Alvin, his dog pushed him to safety. The train hit Tippy and cut off one of his legs. According to the article in the *New York Times*, "Tippy won't chase the birds so fast again. He can't, on just three legs. But it will not matter so much, because if Tippy wishes it when he comes home from the veterinarian's, the parents of Alvin Johnson will gladly chase the birds for him."¹¹ More recently, a

Welsh Corgi named Duke pulled his elderly owner from the path of a truck that was driving on the wrong side of the road. The truck missed them by inches.

More complex stories are also the same over time. In 1928, a German Shepherd named Max seemed to understand the danger of fire and the need to get his owner to safety. According to a newspaper article, Max's owner, Gilbert Kirkwood, fell asleep while smoking in bed and his cigarette set the blanket on fire. Max had the presence of mind to pull the burning blanket off the bed, and drag Kirkwood, who was now unconscious from the smoke, into the kitchen. Max barked loudly and woke up the neighbors, who noticed the smoke and broke into the apartment.¹²

Another dog that seemed to understand the danger of fire was a German Shepherd named Peggy. In 1933, Peggy's owner, George Howell, was working on a boiler when it exploded. Burning oil splattered Howell and his clothes immediately caught fire. Peggy pulled Howell away from the boiler, smothering the flames against the floor and saving him from severe burns.¹³

Then there was a Collie named Duke who lived almost thirty years after Max and Peggy. One windy day, eleven-year-old Penny was outside playing with Duke while her father burned leaves nearby. Sparks from the leaves blew onto Penny's dress and it immediately burst into flames. Duke grabbed the dress and ripped the burning fabric off Penny. Duke burned his mouth, but Penny was unhurt.¹⁴

Modern stories share similarities with myths that are hundreds of years old. Guinefort saved an infant from an attacking snake. In 1992, Lady, a husky-retriever mix, jumped in front of an eight-year-old girl to shield her from a rattlesnake. The snake bit Lady three times but the child was untouched.¹⁵ There are also stories of modern dogs with the same faithfulness as Argus, like Fido, an Italian dog who waited close to twenty years for his

owner's return.

Every evening Fido met his owner at the bus stop when he came home from work. In 1943 Fido's owner died in a bombing raid, but Fido never gave up hope of seeing him again. Every evening for the next fifteen years, Fido returned to the bus stop to wait. The *Guinness Book of Pet Records* officially recognizes Fido as the record holder for the longest canine vigil, and the town rewarded his devotion with a memorial and gold medal.

These real life stories are as satisfying as any fictional tale. Dog heroism is real as evidenced in the past as well as the present. But why are dogs heroic and how did this behavior develop?