

# **What Animals Teach Us about Loyalty and Heroism in the Midst of Tragedy**

**By**  
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As the towers shook on the morning of September 11, thousands of people – some co-workers and some strangers – instinctively attempted to make their way down the many flights of stairs. Those who were able-bodied lifted the feeble ones to safety. In one office, two men carried a blind woman down 70 flights of stairs. In another, a man dragged an elderly co-worker with him as he ran to the street below. Unfortunately, not everyone made it out in time, and some chose to stay with co-workers and friends who could not make their way down the stairs. It was a day when people put aside their own needs and scrambled to help those less fortunate.

Was September 11<sup>th</sup> a wake-up call? You bet. The consumerism of the 80s and economic highs of the 90s ingrained a materialistic mentality throughout our American culture. Those who “had,” namely Hollywood celebrities, high-paid sports figures, and business tycoons became living idols to young and old alike. The media’s glorification of these people made us feel that we had to emulate them in some way. As a result, the American public found inspiration in those who could reach upper socio-economic levels, and a great many people put success and accomplishment above doing good and helping others.

Somewhere during that time we evolved into a nation that devalued loyalty and heroism – two of the qualities at the cornerstone of our humanity. Married couples couldn’t stay loyal to each other, as evidenced by the climbing divorce rate. Corporate loyalty didn’t fare much better, as the formerly robust employee marketplace rewarded workers for hopping from job to job, and companies often showed little recognition for employee loyalty. The courage and great works of heroes like Mother Theresa, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. slowly faded as the accomplishments of these new celebrity heroes took over. Sure, we admired our former heroes for their dedication and efforts, but true hero status became expressly reserved for rap singers, basketball legends and dot.com gurus.

The morning of September 11, 2001 changed the world. In the process, the events of that day changed the American people and their way of life as well. While the terrorism attacks upon our nation were devastating acts of cowardice, they had one unplanned positive effect: they made the nation wake up to what’s really important in life, namely love, loyalty, and heroism. For the first time in many years, the American public began having more appreciation for life. We were all becoming more willing to put our personal interests aside for the good of another.

As the day progressed, we saw the true heroes of our nation emerge: the firefighters, the police officers, the medical workers, and the everyday citizens who banded together to do what they could during this national tragedy. We saw strangers unite to comfort and console, help and heal. Companies devastated by the loss of office space, technology, and staff vowed to assist surviving employees and the grieving family members. And from coast to coast, people from all walks of life came together to offer prayers, support, money, and anything else that could benefit the victims.

While such acts of heroism and loyalty are inspiring, they are in fact around us every day. Unfortunately, many people have spent the past two decades caught up in their own self-centered pursuits. As a result they failed to notice the little yet important acts that occur in their own home and community. Perhaps nothing exemplifies such profound yet unnoticed displays of loyalty and heroism more than our companion animals. Through their everyday feats of heroism and constant

displays of loyalty, companion animals teach us to value what is truly important in life.

### **Everyday Heroes**

At Ground Zero animals play a critical role in the search and recovery efforts. While the work is grueling and thankless, the dogs persevere out of loyalty to their handlers and because of the unique and impenetrable bond between the two. Observing the animals and how they are dedicated to their task is a learning moment for us all. Through the animals' actions, we discover the true essence of loyalty and heroism and how the two traits are intimately intertwined.

"It was horrific! It looks like a bomb site," exclaimed Roger Picard as he described his experience at Ground Zero with Jessie, his five-year-old yellow lab who accompanied him as part of the search and rescue team from Florida. Picard's team located 10 bodies of fallen firefighters and police officers. Aside from the cadaver finds, what stood out most to him was the amount of debris which included draperies, computer components, twisted steel from the buildings, and strewn body parts.

What she encountered at Ground Zero as she sniffed through the rubble affected Jessie so much that she wouldn't urinate for days. As a result, she developed a bladder infection and began to bleed and get sick. Veterinarians on site put Jessie on antibiotics and she has since recovered. However, Roger worries about the long-term consequences of her inhaling the mercury, asbestos, and other carcinogens. Unlike the handlers, the dogs didn't wear masks as they sniffed for 12-hour shifts at a time.

To date, many articles have been written about the dogs at Ground Zero and the incredible jobs they did in helping to find bodies. Unfortunately, most of the finds were cadavers and body parts. A FEMA dog on site with Jessie, named Satchmo, also worked tirelessly. He helped discover two bodies in a truck buried under the rubble. Other dogs literally pulled their handlers to the disaster site and couldn't wait to get started despite their own injuries and fatigue.

Why did the dogs behave the way they did? Some observers hypothesize that the dogs are acting courageously for the sake of helping others. Others report that the dogs are depressed because they aren't finding live people as they were trained to do. However, expert handlers believe that the dogs endure these conditions for two main reasons: a desire to be loyal to their handlers and the fact that they associate searching with the opportunity to play.

### **Feline Firefighter**

Aside from Ground Zero, animal heroism stories are around us every day. Most of these stories are typically about dogs – and for good reason. With their superior sense of smell, dogs can detect scents that humans can't, and the larger breeds are strong enough to pull humans to safety. However, cats can be heroic, too. Consider the true story of Muffin, a calico cat that saved her human family from danger.

On January 12, 1999, Daniele picked up her twins (a boy and a girl) from pre-school. She had planned to run some errands immediately afterwards, but she had an unexplainable feeling that she should go directly home after picking up the children. She tried to ignore it but couldn't.

When Daniele and the twins got home, she began to make their lunch. For some reason, Muffin was acting up. She was meowing loudly and in a distressed way. Daniele kept telling the cat to "wait a minute," but Muffin wouldn't stop. Finally, Muffin went upstairs and began making noise by at first pushing her body against the master bedroom door, and when there was no response, she started forcefully

throwing herself against the door. When Daniele went upstairs to settle Muffin down, she instinctively opened the door to the master bedroom. To her horror, she saw flames shooting from the closet. In a panic, she grabbed a blanket from the bed and attempted to put the fire out. The blanket caught fire. Daniele then went to get the cordless phone to call the fire department, but she couldn't find it.

Part of the house was engulfed in flames by the time Daniele found the phone in the living room and called 911. She grabbed the twins and ran to safety at a neighbor's house. When the firefighters arrived, Daniele realized that Muffin was still in the house. One of the firefighters went back inside and found Muffin huddled in the closet of the twins' room. He grabbed Muffin and made his way out of the thick smoke and hot flames.

That day, Muffin was a hero. Because of her actions, Muffin won the International Cat Association's Trophy for Heroism for 2000. Even more rewarding to Daniele is that her husband, Dan, who had never really connected with animals in the past, has finally taken to Muffin. Apparently, Muffin has shown him how committed and heroic cats can be.

### **The Hero's Eyes**

Scientific research has begun to validate the role service animals play in people's lives. In 1995, a two-year study by Dr. Karen Allen et al. found that people with disabilities who had service dogs experienced better psychological well being and higher self-esteem than those without service animals. People with disabilities who are dog owners also integrated into the community better and were able to exert more control over their environment. Other studies cite the findings of improved independence and social acceptance. Obviously, service dogs are of great benefit to those who need them. And the sense of protection and security are on top of the many tasks service animals are trained to do. Consider the following example of a service dog in action.

Pat went blind in 1991. Prior to that, she headed customer service worldwide for a major computer company. Because of a congenital condition that had been hastened by the high stress of her career, her eyesight slowly deteriorated, eventually resulting in total blindness. One year later, Pat attended Southeastern Guide Dogs, Inc. where she got her guide dog, a black lab named Bart.

Pat was bound and determined not to let her new disability slow her down. In her first year with Bart, they accumulated 100,000 air miles. But all those miles wouldn't have been possible if Pat hadn't learned a very important lesson during her and Bart's first business trip together.

Pat and Bart were staying at a New Orleans hotel for a business convention. About 5:30 a.m., Pat took Bart out behind the parking garage to relieve himself. As they walked toward the grounds behind the hotel, Bart started to disobey Pat's commands.

Despite Pat's attempts to get the dog to walk around the building and do his business, Bart began leading her in another direction. Pat resisted, but Bart was strong, and his determination didn't falter. Then she felt his fur brush up against her leg, and she could tell it was standing on end, so she reluctantly followed him. It felt like they were making a big U-turn, and Bart's route led them to the front of the hotel. When they got to the lobby, Pat couldn't understand what was wrong with Bart. She began to yell at him saying, "I'm going to take you back to the guide dog school."

Just then a woman who was on her way to her housekeeping job at the hotel came running toward them. She said, "Madame, please don't be upset with your dog. I was looking out of the window of the bus, and I saw the whole thing. A man stepped out from behind the stairwell. He had a gun, and he was coming at you. I

told the bus driver to stop when I saw that you were walking right toward the gunman, but he wouldn't. Your dog was getting you out of danger and made you walk in the opposite direction."

After the lady explained what had happened, Pat fell to her knees and began to hug Bart. The action he had taken is called "intelligent disobedience." That day Pat and Bart became a true team. She also finally understood what true loyalty and heroism meant.

### **Loyalty and Heroism: Two Needed Virtues**

Clearly, companion animals can display loyalty and heroism, and through their example, we can learn how to incorporate these values into our own lives every day. When you welcome loyalty and heroism into your own life, you gain a greater sense of awareness and respect for yourself and for those around you. You also become more aligned with your values and are willing to stand up for them when necessary. As a result of staying true to your beliefs and helping others in need, you begin to see all the gifts you can offer the world while you recognize the talents others bring to the mix. Those who do live by loyalty and heroism soon discover that they can use their individual talents to better the world as a whole.

Being loyal and heroic are necessary parts of the human experience. We can all learn from the many examples our companion animals give us every day and make loyalty and heroism inspirational and vital parts of our character and our lives.

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