

Throughout history, dogs have shown their worth in numerous ways. Guard dogs, police dogs, and rescue dogs have been around for centuries. Looking at the qualities of these diverse creatures, it is not hard to see why they have become such a large part of society. Loyalty, humility, and obedience are some of the positive attributes that prove canines to truly be “man’s best friend.” So when Travis, a boy of about fifteen, stumbles upon an extraordinarily smart, loyal, and brave farm dog, it is no wonder he learns to treasure and rely on the animal for protection and assistance with his work on the farm. It is also no wonder, then, that he is devastated when a supposedly rabid wolf attacks and infects his loyal compatriot. Rabies is a disease that slowly but surely destroys its victim, ultimately leading to a painful death. Because of this disease’s highly contagious nature, Travis is forced to keep Old Yeller, his dog, locked up until it is confirmed that he had indeed been infected by rabies. After about two weeks of careful observation and negative reports, Travis is faced with the decision of whether or not to shoot his faithful friend to end his misery and the threat he poses. Although the dog appeared to be rabid and Travis’s mother had begged him to finish the animal off, Travis was hasty in his decision to shoot Old Yeller, and it was the wrong choice in the end.

Old Yeller’s behavior was changed after the encounter with the wolf—that was certain. However, more evidence than only strange behavior is needed to condemn an animal to death. Travis could not be sure that Old Yeller was infected by rabies. The night Old Yeller fought the wolf, Travis, his mom, his brother, and a friend were burning the carcass of an infected cow that had died from rabies. Travis was not at the fire when the wolf first attacked, so he was not present during the whole fight. The wolf, which was eventually shot by Travis, was never confirmed to be rabid. He was only assumed to have the disease because he ran toward the bright fire, which wolves are rarely known to do in a healthy state. Also, even if the wolf did carry rabies, Travis could not be sure that Old Yeller was bitten by the animal. Though he did see them fighting and clawing, he could not prove that the wolf had penetrated Old Yeller’s hide and fur with his teeth. And proof is surely necessary when it comes to a decision of life or death.

Even if Travis did have proof that Old Yeller was rabid, he was not in the position to make the decision to put him to death. Travis’s dad had left months before and was still out of town when the incident occurred. Because this took place long before email, text, or phones of any kind, Travis had no way to reach his father and ask his opinion. Although Travis had been trusted by his father to take care of the farm, he was still too young to make a decision as consequential as this on his own. Not only was Travis far too inexperienced for this decision, but he was under pressure from his family and friends. His mom urged him not to take a risk and to shoot the dog. Arliss, his younger brother, refused to believe that his dog had rabies and so pleaded with Travis not to kill him. Bud Searcy, a local friend, warned Travis that rabies was no joke, that he should take no chances. Because of the tense situation, the high pressure, and his lack of experience, Travis should not have been the one to make that decision.

Even if Old Yeller truly was rabid and his death was necessary, having the dog’s own master shoot him was not the best way to finish him off. Shooting the dog himself would be detrimental to Travis’s self-confidence and his credibility with Arliss. Arliss was not old enough to understand that Old Yeller was going to die anyway, and he might blame Travis for the death of his faithful pet. Eventually, however, Arliss would grow out of that youthful mindset. But Old Yeller would not. Old Yeller had been as loyal a dog as there ever was. It was he who had fought off an angry mother bear to save Arliss. It was he who had wrestled down a mad bull. It was he who had saved Travis’s life by risking his own. And now, he was being killed by the very man he lived to please.

In life, we are defined by the decisions we make. Small, everyday decisions are often made with very little planning and consideration and very rarely bring substantial consequences. Large decisions,

though, must be thoroughly weighed because the wrong choice can bring results that are devastating. And very few decisions are more crucial than those that determine life or death. Travis was faced with one such decision as he looked at his loyal, faithful, selfless dog down the barrel of his gun. Old Yeller had not been proved to have rabies, yet nearly everyone claimed he did. Travis was not capable of making the decision, yet nearly everyone insisted he did. Old Yeller, the protector, the defender, was about to be shot by the one he loved most, yet no one stepped in and showed him mercy. And for as long as he lived, Travis had to deal with the consequences of that one decision.