



# JAMES MCWILLIAMS

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## An Eloquent Plea for Bill and Lou from Edinburgh

» October 30th, 2012



49 Comments



The following letter came to me from Antonia Fraser Fujinaga, a graduate student in the UK—she sent it to Green Mountain College as well. It's especially eloquent. On a related note, I cannot name names but offers of BIG BUCKS have been pouring into GMC to "purchase" Bill and Lou. We're talking tens of thousands of dollars and a sum total close to (or even over) \$100,000. You could buy a lot of kale for the cafeteria with that kind of money. In any case, I really would hate to see these animals be slaughtered. What a damn shame that would be.

The letter:

Dear Sirs,

Although the matter of the oxen that your institution plans to slaughter has already received vast amounts of attention, given that lives are on the line it would be remiss of me to fail to do everything in my power to save them (some of you, as philosophers, may understand this). Hence this message, which I hope you will be kind enough to read.

The university's overall programme of promoting sustainability and reducing ecological damage is laudable. However, I fear that the 'showdown' that is occurring between the university and opponents of the slaughter may be preventing representatives of the university from backing down from their plan even in the face of reasonable arguments and in spite of the best interests not only of the institution itself, but also of the greater sustainability movement. I fear that this has become a matter of saving face. Furthermore, it is quite clear that whether this is so or not, large numbers of people believe that it is, and consequently, by slaughtering these oxen the university's representatives would be projecting an image of wanting to appear right at any cost – at the cost of lives (other than their own), and at the cost of following a course of action which may not promote maximal sustainability and may tarnish the university's reputation in the long term, endangering it and thereby damaging its mission far more than sparing these oxen would.

I sha'n't burden you with details of arguments that you have presumably heard before: the fact that the retired oxen would continue to produce valuable fertiliser during their retirement, the fact that resource consumption without concomitant production is not used as a reason to slaughter old or disabled humans, the question of whether meat consumption is ecologically optimal if scaled up globally and therefore whether it genuinely represents GMC's ethos of ecological sustainability, the similarity of 'cultural accommodation' arguments posed in favour of meat eating nowadays with those formerly used in favour of 'humane slavery' as opposed to the abolition of slavery, and so on. I shall be only too happy to engage in a discussion of such details with any of you if you wish, provided that it gives the oxen a chance to escape slaughter (this being my goal).

However, I would like to make a few simple points of my own.

Killing is irreversible, and by nature against the interests of those killed, as manifested by the survival instinct that we all have. Therefore, firstly, 'not killing' stands out as the default, with the onus of proof being instead on 'killing' and whether it is unavoidable and absolutely necessary. Secondly, given the irreversibility of killing, one should err on the side of caution and refrain from killing if there are still doubts about its absolute necessity. I believe that your university has extensively discussed the pros and cons of killing these unfortunate ruminants, and shall not insult you by claiming otherwise. What is crucial is that there still appear to be 'cons' – in other words, there is still doubt, which militates against overriding the 'no-killing' default and also against performing irreversible acts. This instance of killing does not appear to be absolutely necessary or unavoidable (and the use of factory farmed meat to compensate the university refectory for loss of protein can be avoided by providing vegetable protein during the days in which the oxen would have been consumed).

Another point is that in all this discussion, lives are being subordinated to abstractions. Two living creatures which have clearly shown the capacity for trust and loyalty, along with a host of other ‘higher functions’ including, presumably, fear and the visceral desire to live, are being sacrificed in order to maintain some sort of coherence with previously stated philosophical positions. I submit that lives are more important than abstractions. No matter how noble abstractions are, if they necessitate killing, they are questionable. A lofty principle – sustainability, for instance – which is incompatible with compassion may perhaps have been suboptimally framed; and indeed, sustainability without meat is not only possible but less problematic than sustainability with meat.

(I do realise that you may be tired of the meat-free idea, but I cannot with a clear conscience avoid mentioning it, because if reducing ecological damage is one’s goal, then the inclusion of meat production into one’s model of sustainability is a serious obstacle to that goal. In his *Subjection of Women*, Mill describes female subordination as an isolated, convenient relic of an old system of thought that has been demolished and abandoned in all other respects; I suspect the same of meat consumption, as a culturally ingrained habit which is clung to even when it hinders progress or the common interest, and even though analogous positions in other areas have been abandoned).

I could go on. And on. But please allow me to make one final, somewhat ‘unladylike’ suggestion. If indeed you are concerned with the oxen going to waste if they evade slaughter, why not allow them to retire with the proviso that you will retrieve and consume their carcases once they have shuffled off this mortal coil?

Then, they will not have gone to waste, their protein will have circulated back into the ‘loop’, and the only damage that will have been caused by their extended life (during which they will have produced useful fertiliser) will be that they will have consumed more resources than if they had died sooner. This will have been offset by the water cost of slaughter, by the compassion and goodwill shown by sparing the oxen (which will be beneficial to the university’s reputation), by the consideration towards the oxen themselves who will not have to suffer terror and agony and have their lives cut unnaturally short, and by the promotion of the concept that sustainability does not have to mean giving up compassion.

You can still avoid condemning the oxen while saving face. You needn’t frame it as ‘backing down’ or having ‘bethought ye’ that you were mistaken. You can frame it in any number of ways: being strong-armed by the rabid vegan activists; doing it to protect the university’s reputation; having concluded that it is important to include compassion in the sustainability model; having, in the democratic spirit, acknowledged the vote of the tens of thousands who have asked for mercy for the oxen; or having, as the mature individuals that you are, come up with a compromise whereby you will postpone consumption of your bovine friends until their lives come to a natural end. (I realise that this may mean starving in a paddock when their teeth have gone; perhaps that would be time for euthanasia, but as far as I know, the oxen still have their teeth and can live happily for some time longer). Even if you do frame it as having changed your mind, you will garner praise and respect for that, because for vast numbers of people, saving lives trumps saving face.

In closing, I implore you to spare the oxen, because killing them is irreversible, because all that your valuable institution has set out to do can be achieved without killing them, and because if the final say were theirs, irrespective of any abstraction, they would choose life.

Respectfully,

Antonia Fraser Fujinaga

PhD student

University of Edinburgh (UK).

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Filed Under: Eating Plants, Vegan Activism | Tagged With: Bill and Lou, Green Mountain College, VINE Sanctuary

## 49 Responses to *An Eloquent Plea for Bill and Lou from Edinburgh*

1.

*Yetik Serbest* says:

October 30, 2012 at 11:25 am

This is it. Now, we will see the real motivation behinf GMC's decision. As I said before, this offer makes perfect sense. Let us buy these animals. What is your argument agaisnt this, GMC?

Reply

2.

*GMC Sustainable Ag. Student* says:

October 30, 2012 at 11:37 am

Kale makes me vomit when I eat too much of it.

Reply



*Stephanie* says:

October 30, 2012 at 12:34 pm

These are exactly the kind of ridiculous & insensitive comments the vacuous students of GMC seem to enjoy making;

“Kale makes me vomit when I eat too much of it.” or “mmm oxen burgers” & “I’m honored to consume them” Just a few among many, very sad, very sick.

There is something wrong with the teaching methods there, something very dark & cult like.

Reply

■

*Anne Furlotte* says:

October 30, 2012 at 3:14 pm

Agree – These students that make such horrible comments will likely be Factory Farmers as their form of making a living . Then these students will spawn more Animal Abusers !

Reply

o

*christie* says:

October 30, 2012 at 1:33 pm

Exactly, Stephanie. There is no kindness, no compassion and very little intelligence in the comments of these GMC students.

These people will reap what they have sown. Every student and faculty member at this 'institution' now has blood on their hands, and yet they sit and laugh and make sarcastic comments. So sick. I would be ashamed if any of these students were my children.

Reply

o

*CaptainSakonna* says:

November 3, 2012 at 2:05 pm

So don't eat too much. It's not as if kale is the only plant food in existence.

Reply

3.

*GMC Sustainable Ag. Student* says:

October 30, 2012 at 11:45 am

VINE creates lies because they want money to fund their operation.

Reply

o

*James* says:

October 30, 2012 at 11:49 am

VINE has nothing to do with these offers. I've personally spoken with two people today who have independently offered 10K and over 50K. To not accept these offers will make for an expensive hamburger. If I were a student at GMC I'd urge my university, which has experienced financial troubles, to accept these offers. Oh, and if kale makes you sick when you eat too much of it, why not avoid eating too much of it?

-James

Reply



*The Humane Hominid* says:

October 30, 2012 at 12:31 pm

Forget VINE. Forget veganism. Just explain why Bill & Lou need to be killed when it's not necessary.

Reply

o

*Dana* says:

October 30, 2012 at 1:49 pm

Attention: GMC Sustainable Ag. Student: I am one of the people, whom James is referring to, as offering a huge amount of money for these two oxen.

I am not affiliated with either the sanctuary or the college. I would have remained anonymous except that your attitude about this reflects your immaturity and ignorance; two attributes that I hope your school does not promote!

Reply

4.

*GMC Sustainable Ag. Student* says:

October 30, 2012 at 11:46 am

Nobody will back down. So, you should just walk away.

Reply

o

*James* says:

October 30, 2012 at 11:58 am

I think what's most unfortunate in your attitude is that it fails to realize something very important: it's not about "backing down," but rather about doing what is morally the right thing to do. If GMC reversed its decision, the outpouring of respect and admiration it would receive would swamp the vitriol it now endures. There is no greater educational lesson, in my opinion, than the fact that we can all change for the better. GMC could do more than teach that message, it could live it.

-James

Reply

o

*william* says:

October 30, 2012 at 12:57 pm

Why are you being so obtuse and hard headed about this ? I thought colleges were supposed to be institutes of higher learning and places of understanding.. the reasons to let them live have been explained,, financially and morally,, and the powers that be,, are still refusing to see that the slaughter of these 2 " friends " ( yea rite ) will be a public relations and financial disaster,, open your eyes sheeshe

Reply

o

*Mary* says:

October 30, 2012 at 5:53 pm

Since your school is all about money, you should jump at the chance. It's certainly not about Education in any way shape or form. Any and all funding should be PULLED from this so-called college and its doors shut forever.

Reply

5.

*Edana* says:

October 30, 2012 at 11:48 am

Antonia hits the nail on the head: once it's done, there's no turning back, and there still seem to be reservations within the College.

Reply

6.

*Karen Messier* says:

October 30, 2012 at 11:57 am

GMC is now forced to consider all the generous benefits it has been offered to allow Bill and Lou to live out their days in peace at Vine sanctuary. The final decision will seal the reputation of the college forever.

Reply

7.

*Marion Smith* says:

October 30, 2012 at 12:10 pm

Whats the big deal about not letting thse animals live? They have worked and earned their retirement, this is the least that can be done, too many animals are slaughtered (inhumanely) every day, vegetarianism/veganism is the way of the future, killing animals is MURDER!

Reply

8.

*Jill Fletcher* says:

October 30, 2012 at 12:34 pm

I think the administrators and board of trustees should think about what they would have done if this kind of money was offered to purchase Bill and Lou before all of this ever happened. I would be surprised if there is a school out there that wouldn't be thanking their lucky stars that someone would be willing to pay that kind of money for two oxen. I agree with Karen, this probably will seal the reputation of this college. At this point someone with authority needs to step in and make the decision that is best for all.

Reply

9.

*James* says:

October 30, 2012 at 12:41 pm

Look at it this way, if we must. Two oxen will yield about 700 or so pounds of edible flesh. That flesh can make about 1400 burgers. If a \$100,000 is being rejected in exchange for the oxen, students at GMC will be eating burgers that cost over \$71 a piece. There is a message in this number, and it's not a hopeful one for a college that has, in the past, experienced financial troubles.

Reply

10.

*Rebecca Stucki* says:

October 30, 2012 at 1:09 pm

It would be sad, though, wouldn't it, if this were just GMC's backhanded method to raise money to put back into their "sustainable murder" program? If it decides to go through with the demise of Bill and Lou, I believe its own demise is not far behind.

Reply

11.

*C Atkins* says:

October 30, 2012 at 1:13 pm

Beyond eloquent, James. In your league. Thanks for sharing this piece.

Reply

12.

*naomi* says:

October 30, 2012 at 1:20 pm

Wonderful letter Antonia; so very, very well said.

Reply

13.

*kimberley* says:

October 30, 2012 at 1:48 pm

Brilliant! I have also written to the college and I implore others to do so. Is there a demo planned?

Reply

14.

*Shane* says:

October 30, 2012 at 2:03 pm

Brilliant post!

Reply

15.

*Shane* says:

October 30, 2012 at 2:16 pm

“Therefore, firstly, ‘not killing’ stands out as the default, with the onus of proof being instead on ‘killing’ and whether it is unavoidable and absolutely necessary. Secondly, given the irreversibility of killing, one should err on the side of caution and refrain from killing if there are still doubts about its absolute necessity”

Couldn’t agree more!

Reply

16.

*Naomi (Roz) Galtz* says:  
October 30, 2012 at 3:24 pm

(sorry if this is a repeat, I think I accidentally deleted my first attempt...but...)

What a gorgeous piece this is—proof that it is possible to use logic to return ourselves to the flesh and blood experience of being in the world, rather than removing ourselves from it.

Thank you so much for writing it, and thank you, James, for posting. Your site is so important.

Reply

17. 

*sara* says:  
October 30, 2012 at 3:53 pm

GMC....Bill and Lou Breaks my heart GMC's ethos of ecological sustainability??? Hello there were does COMPASSION come in??? I think you need to learn about Compassion for this planet

Reply

18.

*Melody* says:  
October 30, 2012 at 5:07 pm

Please contact the college and post on the GMC facebook page and also, the GMC alumni community facebook page – \$100,000 could be used by GMC to establish a scholarship for students, contribute to their “sustainability” programs and most of all, a “win-win” – the college has a huge PR opportunity here. There would be droves of people traveling to Vermont to see Bill & Lou ~ and the college’s reputation would be saved...

Reply

19.

*James* says:  
October 30, 2012 at 5:28 pm

I'm posting this comment on behalf of Mark Williams:

The remarks from GMC Sustainable Ag. Student (“kale makes me vomit” and “VINE creates lies”) are similar to the many social-media postings made by other GMC students and several self-identified GMC alums during the public disagreement concerning Bill and Lou.

Remarks of this nature, tending towards “everyone except GMC is lying about everything and it’s none of your business anyway,” are the common element to essentially everything that the world has heard from GMC since several distraught students first took the story public a number of weeks ago. Remarks like this, which snowballed into terrifying, graphic descriptions of violence to animals (particularly poor old Bill and Lou) will circulate on the web forever. They will define GMC and its students. They demonstrate the legitimacy of the numerous questions that have recently been raised about exactly what GMC is. They have led observers of this mess to research GMC and to discover that GMC’s academic history is exceptionally dicey, its performance is undistinguished, its students are not comprehensively prepared, and its claims to some special environmental status are nothing more than self-serving, cosmetic pretense.

Reply

20.

*C Atkins* says:

October 30, 2012 at 5:35 pm

Does anyone have an update? There are several comments (from people) on their FB page that speak in terms that would indicate that Bill+Lou have already been killed. I thought the deadline was October 31. Dear god. I hope not.

Reply

21.

*C Atkins* says:

October 30, 2012 at 5:35 pm

Sorry..by “their” I meant Green Mt College’s FB page

Reply

22.

*Melody* says:

October 30, 2012 at 7:00 pm

We are receiving conflicting reports as to whether Bill & Lou are truly still at the farm... We are in the “Save Bill & Lou” group at facebook and unfortunately there are people playing with whether the news is accurate or not. I have a shout out for GMC ~ if Bill & Lou are murdered, we are going NO WHERE and will increase our efforts tenfold!

Reply

23.

*Kimberley* says:

October 30, 2012 at 7:59 pm

If I was in the area I would organize a demo and human shield. Is anybody able to do this ? To me these two oxen represent a crucial battle for the hearts and minds of people who might be persuaded that animals are not ours to do with as we please.

Reply

24.

*Tapan Patnaik* says:

October 31, 2012 at 12:46 am

The words have come from Antoni's heart! Excellent! Hope her please does not fall on deaf ears and goes unheeded.

Reply

25.

*Tapan Patnaik* says:

October 31, 2012 at 12:48 am

If it was Europe by this time the University would have spared the lives on face of these pleas. But America is different. Full of arrogant scums. No logic, no heart.

Reply

26.

*A. Fraser Fujinaga* says:

October 31, 2012 at 5:49 am

Thanks, Dr McWilliams, for posting my letter, and to all of you for your kind remarks and contributions.

Though this could be risky or even distasteful, I must make an observation about the 'it's none of your business how we run our system' argument that some GMC representatives have repeatedly posed. My academic research focuses on Iranian criminal trials, and the very same 'it's our business and you don't understand our system' argument is used time and time again by the Iranian

government when people protest about its executions and amputations carried out for victimless or minor crimes.

I am not saying that GMC is like the Iranian government in some general sense (which would be silly). What I am saying is that this ‘it’s our business’ argument is overridden when ‘our business’ includes killing innocents, and that the example of the Iranian government can make this easier to understand. It exposes the flimsiness of one of the main arguments used against efforts to save Bill and Lou. The right to life trumps the right to be protected from criticism.

Bill and Lou might still be alive, and reliable sources have claimed they were seen around 4 in the afternoon. Let’s continue trying to save them: time is short and the stakes are high. Thanks to you all for listening. -Ants.

Reply

o

*Beth L* says:

October 31, 2012 at 7:59 am

Certainly not distasteful (I understand it might have felt risky for you to write) and a very important addition to the discussion.

Reply

27.

*Karen Messier* says:

October 31, 2012 at 8:34 am

Our food system is not the only thing that is broken. The disconnect of GMC continues:

<http://vtdigger.org/2012/10/30/ackerman-leist-bill-and-lou-are-a-parable-for-saving-our-broken-food-system/>

Reply

28.

*Abigail* says:

October 31, 2012 at 9:06 am

What a gorgeous letter.

Reply

29.

*Sailesh Rao* says:

October 31, 2012 at 2:55 pm

On SuperStorm Bill and Lou...

<http://climatehealers.ning.com/profiles/blogs/superstorm-bill-and-lou>

Reply

o

*Fireweed* says:

October 31, 2012 at 5:37 pm

ha! I was just about to post your fantastic essay, Sailesh...glad to see it here! A must read, folks!

Reply

30.

*Mark Williams* says:

October 31, 2012 at 8:36 pm

I understand that Green Mountain College has issued the following internal statement (which may not be complete).

Date: October 31, 2012

To: GMC Campus Community

From: President Paul J. Fonteyn

Re: Update on Bill and Lou

...As you know, Green Mountain College has become the focus of widespread attention regarding our decision to slaughter our ten-year old team of oxen. I stand by the decision our community arrived at through a process that insured that all members had the opportunity to express their opinions.

I also compliment faculty, staff and students who, whether they personally agreed with the final decision or not, have demonstrated extraordinary civility in their interactions with each other, and with external individuals and organizations. Some of these external groups are attempting to use Bill and Lou as mascots for their own animal rights agendas. I am appalled by the abusive nature of some of the communications you have been receiving—if you are concerned about personal threats please notify the Office of Student Affairs.

Initially we decided to slaughter the oxen by the end of this month. However, we will not be able to meet this timetable because regional slaughterhouses have been inundated with hostile and

threatening emails and phone calls from extremist groups bent on interfering with the processing. These businesses are mostly small, family-operated Vermont enterprises that provide local meat for local consumers. This is a busy time of year for them, and many have expressed fears that their operations might be shut down by protesters if they accept the oxen.

We have decided to continue to care for the oxen until a date with a reputable slaughterhouse can be obtained. In the meantime, Lou and Bill will not be sent to a sanctuary but will continue to stay with us in familiar surroundings. Eventually the animals will be processed as planned.

Reply

31.

*Umesh Rao* says:

October 31, 2012 at 11:54 pm

I suggest creating a cause on causes.com to save the lives of Bill and Lou. It is an effective way to get the attention of the world to bear on the University. Somebody who has the details of the case should take up the responsibility.

Reply

32.

*giovanna giubelli* says:

November 1, 2012 at 2:02 am

Animals,children,plants of any kind have saved,save,will save the world.We all have to think deeply about that.This is the simple,but sincere thought of a Florentine poet.Giovanna.

Reply

33. *Superstorm Bill and Lou and the Diet for a Sustainable Future | One Green Planet* says:

November 2, 2012 at 9:01 am

[...] decision to eat Bill and Lou despite the offer from Vine Sanctuary to retire them and despite the offer of around \$100K in donations from people around the world to save Bill and Lou. It is easy to connect the dots if [...]

Reply

34.

*Cecilia Resende* says:

November 4, 2012 at 1:51 pm

Killing is irreversible, and by nature against the interests of those killed, as manifested by the survival instinct that we all have

Reply

35.

*Janie Christensen* says:

November 7, 2012 at 9:02 pm

Antonia, I am very moved by your eloquence and I hope the administrators at the college have been moved as well. Thank you for the effort you've made. Your logic is beautiful.

Reply

36. *A 'principled stand' against compassion: Green Mountain College and the slaughter of working oxen (Op-Ed)* « *Animal Issues Reporter* says:

November 27, 2012 at 3:56 pm

[...] <http://james-mcwilliams.com/?p=2553> [...]

Reply

37. *A 'principled stand' against compassion: Green Mountain College and the slaughter of working oxen (Op-Ed)* | *Animal Issues Reporter (AIR)* says:

September 25, 2013 at 5:29 pm

[...] <http://james-mcwilliams.com/?p=2553> [...]

Reply

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