



Three Cups of Tea:

One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations... One School at a Time

Authors: Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin

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About The Authors:

Greg Mortenson is the director of the Central Asia Institute (CAI), a foundation dedicated to building schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He lives in Montana with his wife and two children. David Oliver Relin is a globetrotting journalist with more than 40 national awards to his credit. He is a former teacher/writer fellow at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a frequent contributor to *Parade* magazine. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

General Overview:

Three Cups of Tea is the story of Greg Mortenson, a homeless mountaineer who, following a 1993 climb of Pakistan's treacherous K2, was inspired by a chance encounter with impoverished mountain villagers and promised to build them a school. Over the next decade, he built 55 schools – especially for girls – that offer a balanced education in one of the most isolated and dangerous regions on earth. As it chronicles Mortenson's quest, which has brought him into conflict with both enraged Islamists and uncomprehending Americans, *Three Cups of Tea* combines adventure with a celebration of the humanitarian spirit.

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Introduction

Greg Mortenson ventured to Pakistan to climb K2, a peak most experts regard as the toughest mountaineering challenge in the world. However, Mortenson failed to reach the summit and soon found himself lost and alone in forbidding glacial terrain. Mortenson drifted for seven days, struggling to survive and contemplating his failure, until he arrived in an impoverished village in the Karakoram Mountains. Moved by the village's hospitality, generosity, and kindness, Mortenson promised to return one day and build a school for their children.

Mortenson returned to the United States to raise the money needed to keep his promise. At the time, however, he was an underemployed nurse with no fixed address. In fact, fund raising would prove every bit as formidable as Mortenson's climbing challenges. However, through sheer perseverance, Mortenson managed to raise the funds and return to Pakistan to build the school he promised.

In the following decade, Mortenson would go on to build 55 schools in the harsh countryside that gave rise to the Taliban. Mortenson's experience has brought him face to face with warlords and the madrassas that are the breeding ground of Islamic extremism, but he has seen firsthand the warmth, benevolence, and generosity of ordinary Muslims. He is convinced that the best way to combat extremism is to eliminate ignorance through education. Combating terrorism, Mortenson believes, is best done with books rather than bombs.

Failure on K2

In 1993, Greg Mortenson was attempting to climb the world's second-highest mountain, K2, in Pakistan. At the time, Mortenson was a skilled mountaineer from America with no permanent address. He had spent time in the Army and was a highly-qualified nurse, but his obsession with climbing meant Mortenson had little left to live on. He frequently lived in flophouses and his car.

Shortly before his K2 attempt, Mortenson's younger sister, Christa, died of an epileptic seizure. The two had been very close and Christa was keenly interested in Greg's mountaineering adventures. After she passed away, Mortenson vowed to dedicate his K2 climb to his sister's memory.

Unfortunately, Mortenson's K2 ascent would prove unsuccessful. A prior climbing rescue had depleted much of Mortenson's strength and his quest had to be aborted. He had come within 600 meters of the summit of the most savage peak in the world but had failed to reach his goal. Worse, he had lost contact with his fellow climbers and a mixture of bad weather and altitude sickness would leave him exhausted and disoriented. He had at least 50 miles of dangerous terrain to cover without adequate provisions.

Mortenson knew his odds of surviving on an unforgiving glacier were poor unless he found food and shelter. After seven days of drifting, Mortenson came across the first sign of human life – five trees planted in a row. “They were five poplars, bowed by strong wind, and waving like the fingers of a welcoming hand,” Mortenson recalled.

The women villagers who saw the “strange white man” emerging from the wilderness quickly pulled their shawls over their faces, but the children warmly greeted their giant (6’4”) visitor. Hospitality is a cultural requirement among the Balti, the tribe Mortenson had stumbled upon. Indeed, village leader Haji Ali welcomed Mortenson by telling him: “Here (in Pakistan and Afghanistan) we drink three cups of tea to do business; the first you are a stranger, the second you become a friend, and the third you join our family, and for our family we are prepared to do anything – even die.”

Mortenson had arrived at a village named Korphe. The generosity and hospitality of the people of Korphe made a deep impression on him. At first, in his weakened state, he thought he had stumbled upon a Shangri-La, but over time he came to realize how difficult life was for the villagers. These were people who endured harsh winters and lived with the barest of necessities. Nevertheless, they had shared what little they had with Mortenson as he recuperated his strength.

The Promise of a School

One day, Haji Ali led his American visitor up a steep path to a spectacular vista. The scenery was breathtaking, of course, but Mortenson also noticed a large group of young children attending a makeshift school. In fact, the children were pursuing their lessons themselves, without a teacher, a building, or books. Mortenson soon learned from his guide that the children had a part-time teacher, which they had to share with another village because the Pakistani government would not even provide the \$1 a day it would cost to provide a full-time teacher.

The notion that these children would suffer because of the corruption and neglect of the Pakistani government overwhelmed Mortenson. He had come to Pakistan to climb K2 to honor his late sister, Christa, but he decided then and there that the best way he could pay homage to her memory was to build a school for these children. He put his hand on Haji Ali shoulder and simply said, “I’m going to build you a school.”

Mortenson returned to the United States in order to raise money to keep his promise. He knew next to nothing about fundraising and he was virtually computer illiterate, but his persistence paid off when a wealthy benefactor by the name of Jean Hoerni agreed to provide the \$20,000 needed to build a school.

Raising money was just the first step in an arduous process. Upon returning to Korphe, Mortenson learned that the remote village would require a bridge before they could begin constructing a school. Then there was the buying and transporting of the materials to Korphe, which entailed working through questionable characters. In fact, Mortenson was

even abducted by a tribe, the Wazir, which operated in this lawless region. Mortenson didn't know if he was being kidnapped for ransom or if he might even be executed. However, the leader of the brigand group, who called himself Khan, had apparently heard about a strange American who was building a school for girls and he wanted to find out if the rumor was true. Amazingly, Mortenson was soon released and Khan actually ended up making a donation in the hope that the American would build more schools!

The Wisest Man Mortenson Ever Met

Mortenson sometimes had to contend with warlords and rival tribes that demanded bribes or were intent on shutting down a school built for girls. In the village of Korphe, for instance, the village elder Haji Ali gave up a prize herd of rams so that a neighboring tribe would leave the school alone. At first, Mortenson was saddened that his friend Haji was forced to part with a great portion of the village's wealth. But as Haji explained to Mortenson, "Long after those rams are dead and eaten this school will stand . . . Now our children will have education forever."

Mortenson was tremendously touched by the sacrifices his friend Haji was willing to make so that his village could have a school. Haji treasured a copy of the Koran he kept with him, but he confided to Mortenson that his greatest sadness in life was the fact that he couldn't read his holy book himself. Mortenson realized that though his friend was illiterate, he was a man who would sacrifice everything he had to make sure the children of his village never experienced the sadness he felt. In this, Mortenson felt Haji Ali was the wisest man he had ever met.

A Young Girl Dreams of Becoming a Doctor

A young Pakistani woman by the name of Jahan also made a strong impression on Mortenson. As a girl, she had attended the school Mortenson built in Korphe – in fact, she was the first graduate of the school's first class – becoming the first educated woman in the village. Jahan had dreams of becoming a doctor and she remembered Mortenson promising he would help her reach her goals if she studied hard. The pluck, determination, and confidence Mortenson saw in Jahan was living proof of a lesson he hoped all his female students would absorb – namely, that they weren't second-class citizens.

Mortenson provided money for Jahan's tuition so that she could pursue her medical training. Her story later led to a feature on Mortenson's humanitarian efforts that appeared in *Parade* magazine. The article, as it happened, coincided with the troop buildup prior to the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. As Mortenson noted in the article, "If we try to resolve terrorism with military might and nothing else then we will be no safer than we were before 9/11. If we truly want a legacy of peace for our children, we need to understand that this [is] a war that will be won with books, not with bombs."

Mortenson never imagined himself building more than one school, but chance and circumstance conspired in ways that have led Mortenson to oversee the construction of 55 schools through the foundation he now leads, the Central Asia Institute (CAI).

Education for girls in particular, Mortenson realized, is a path out of poverty for entire villages. This is because young men with an education tend to leave their villages, whereas young women with an education remain behind to share their knowledge and skills with their children and the community.

The Enemy is Ignorance

As Mortenson was building his schools, he became aware of the Saudi-financed madrassas (fundamentalist religious schools) that were becoming the breeding ground of Islamic extremism. Mortenson had experienced firsthand that Islam was a religion of peace and tolerance. Put simply, Mortenson believed that the violence and anti-Western attitudes advocated by the fundamentalists was incompatible with the core principles of the Muslim faith.

Extremism thrived, Mortenson felt, where ignorance prevailed. It was no accident that Islamic fundamentalists opposed the education of girls; once education opened up economic opportunity, the extremists' appeal would wither. The best way to fight Islamic extremism and terrorism, Mortenson came to realize, was through education.

In the spring of 2001, as Mortenson traversed Pakistan and the Afghan border area, he was amazed to see Wahhabi madrassas springing up everywhere. Wahhabism is a conservative fundamentalist state religion promoted by the Saudi Royal Family. Much of Saudi Arabia's oil wealth, in other words, was pouring into Pakistan ostensibly to educate impoverished students, but they also served to indoctrinate young boys. Mortenson saw this as a troublesome and complex issue. As he noted, "many of their schools and mosques are doing good work to help Pakistan's poor. But some of them exist only to teach militant *jihād*." So long as Pakistani schools were under-funded and failing, and so long as the West ignored the plight of the impoverished people in this part of the world, then the forces promoting extremism would fill the vacuum.

The World Bank estimates that roughly 15 to 20 percent of the students attending madrassas are taught an anti-Western curriculum along with military training. However, madrassas generally cater to the poorest of the poor, providing food and shelter to Pakistani children who have fallen through the cracks. Unfortunately, the almost exclusive emphasis on the Koran means that subjects like math, geometry, and history are neglected. As a result, students educated at madrassas do not receive a balanced education, which is what they need most to pull themselves out of poverty. Instead, they receive a distorted and ideological brand of Islam that all too often predisposes them to the only occupation many of them know: warfare.

Mortenson is adamant that CAI schools steer clear of anything that might be seen as trying to undermine Islam. His goal is to provide a basic education up to the fifth-grade level because, as he puts it, if you can reach that stage “everything changes.” That is, if you can reach that level, particularly with girls, basic hygiene, health care, and infant mortality rates all move in the right direction.

As Mortenson puts it, the best way to change a culture is to empower women. “I don’t want to teach Pakistani children to think like Americans. I just want them to have a balanced, non-extremist education. That idea is at the very center of what we do.” By insisting on teaching only core educational competencies – i.e., avoiding anything that smacks of a pro-Western political or religious agenda – Mortenson ensures that he does not give ammunition to religious leaders who might otherwise try to shut the schools down.

Mortenson’s efforts to educate girls won widespread admiration among ordinary Muslims, as well as officers in the Pakistani military. However, the U.S. invasion of Iraq had a hugely deleterious impact on America’s image. Pakistani military personnel, who had befriended Mortenson because of his humanitarian efforts, confided to him that the images coming out of Iraq, which included collateral damage and the abuses at Abu Ghraib, were so repulsive that it made many of them feel like becoming jihadis.

The mistreatment of prisoners at Guantanamo, which included ordinary Afghans, had a similar effect across the region. As one Pakistani military officer told Mortenson regarding the feelings moderate Muslims had towards the Bush Administration’s invasion of Iraq: “Your President Bush has done a wonderful job of uniting one billion Muslims against America for the next two hundred years.”

Mortenson had the opportunity to brief U.S. military and civilian leaders at the Pentagon regarding his perspective on the war in Afghanistan. Mortenson initially supported the war in Afghanistan because he hoped the United States would be serious about rebuilding the country. However, Mortenson was mortified by the way the Bush administration was handling collateral damage. Put simply, Mortenson recognized that failing to count and compensate victims and their families would be considered a grave insult within the Islamic world. After all, tribal traditions in Afghanistan required warring parties to care for the widows and orphans of the adversaries they defeated in battle. The U.S. was ignoring the victims, and “for that, we will never be forgiven” Mortenson warned.

Mortenson also pointed out the irony of the fact that the United States had launched more than 100 cruise missiles – at the cost of \$840,000 each – into Afghanistan. For that kind of money, Mortenson noted, America could build dozens of schools and educate tens of thousands of students, which would dissuade an entire generation from extremism.

Many of the officers Mortenson briefed at the Pentagon were impressed with his presentation, but Mortenson was adamant that neither he nor his foundation would consider taking money from the U.S. military because to do so would compromise his credibility in the Muslim world. Indeed, Mortenson took great pains to respect local customs and traditions by not attempting to promote any kind of pro-Western or Christian agenda or curriculum, which certainly would have engendered resistance. In fact, Mortenson won so much admiration among the local tribes because his mission was helping local villages educate their children as *they* saw fit. As a result, Muslims recognized Mortenson as someone who embodied the ideals of charity and service to humanity espoused by Islam.

Members of Congress have also solicited Mortenson's views. In particular, U.S. Representative Mary Bono (wife of the late Sonny Bono) embraced Mortenson's approach by introducing him to her colleagues as "an American fighting terror in Pakistan and Afghanistan by building girls' schools." Some members, needless to say, were skeptical, contending that "building schools for kids is just fine and dandy" but that such projects would have to take a backseat to measures that would more immediately improve our national security. But as Mortenson argued, terrorists don't just crop up because people in Afghanistan or Pakistan suddenly wake up and decide to hate us. Rather, "it happens because children aren't being offered a bright enough future [and thus] they have a reason to choose life over death."

Conclusion

Many observers believe Greg Mortenson will win the Nobel Peace Prize someday. Certainly, his work and his life are a testament to the difference a single individual can make in the world. Without a doubt, Mortenson is one of the best ambassadors America could ever have. His example and dedication have endeared him to countless Muslims.

Further, the schools he has built will provide a powerful and long-term inoculation and antidote to the extremism that pervades much of Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is no question that Mortenson's humanitarian efforts are more daunting than any mountain peak he ever attempted to climb. But it is also true that the humanitarian spirit Greg embodies represents America's best hope of defeating terrorism.

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