

## Book Review

### *Three Cups of Tea:* One Man's Mission to Promote Peace One School at a Time

*Authors: Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin*  
*Publisher: Penguin Books, 2006 ISBN 978-0-14-303825.*

In 1993, mountaineer Greg Mortenson, an emergency room nurse by vocation, drifted into an impoverished village in Pakistan after a failed attempt to climb K2, the second peak in the Karakoram Mountains.

Like his father, Mortenson had been born in Minnesota. But in 1958, when he was only 3 months old, his parents packed him along on the great adventure of their lives, a posting to work as missionaries teaching in Tanzania, in the shadow of the continent's highest peak, Mount Kilimanjaro. Perhaps this experience in Tanzania was the reason Mortenson developed a passion for mountaineering and community work.

Moved by the kindness of the villagers following his near-death experience, Mortenson promised to return and build a school. *Three Cups of Tea* is the story of that promise and its extraordinary outcome.

Mortenson returned home broke. He moonlighted as a nurse and slept in his car in the parks around Berkeley, California, to save money. He projected a budget of \$12,000 for his first school and wrote 580 letters to potential donors. The only donor who responded was Dr. Jean Hoerni, an entrepreneur who founded several companies in the Silicon Valley. Dr. Hoerni, another hero in this book, had a special fondness for the Karakoram, where he had gone trekking, and he sent a check for \$12,000.

Over 10 years, Mortenson built not 1 but 55 schools—mostly for girls—in some of the most conservative villages in North West Pakistan and later in Afghanistan. How a Christian of modest means won the hearts and minds of the inhabitants is a riveting story that is heart warming and a testament to the power of the humanitarian spirit.

After seeing that Mortenson was genuine and

delivered on his promise, the village elders accepted him as part of the family. The book title relates to that, best expressed by Haji Ali, the Korpe village chief in the Karakoram mountains in Pakistan. He said:

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.

#### Haji Ali's Lessons

A key figure in this book is Haji Ali, the village chief, who plays a crucial role as an advisor, mentor, and teacher for Mortenson. The following excerpts from their exchanges will highlight this:

Haji Ali said: Doctor Greg, you must take time to share three cups of tea. We may be uneducated. But we are not stupid. We have lived and survived here for a long time.

Mortenson recalled: That day, Haji Ali taught me the most important lesson I have ever learned in my life.

We Americans think you have to accomplish everything quickly. We are the country of thirty-minute power lunches and two-minute football drills. Our leaders thought their 'shock and awe' campaign could end the war in Iraq before it even started. Haji Ali taught me to share three cups of tea, to slow down and make building relationships as important as building projects. He taught me that I had more to learn from the people I work with than I could ever hope to teach them. (page 150)

Haji Ali said to Mortenson: Can I give you some advice?

Why don't you leave it to us? I will call a meeting of all the elders of the Braldu and see which village is ready to donate free land and labor for a school.

Mortenson, reflecting on his advise, wrote: So once again, an illiterate old Balti taught a Westerner how to go about developing his 'backward area.'

Ever since then, with all the schools I've built, I've remembered Haji Ali's advice and expanded slowly, from village to village and valley to valley, going where we'd already built relationships, instead of trying to hopscotch to places I had no contacts, like Waziristan. (page 177)

Of course not all natives acted like Haji Ali. Mortenson was abducted and held hostage for a week, and a local cleric subsequently issued a fatwa stating that the infidel Mortenson should build no more schools for girls. This damaging fatwa was referred to higher scholars. After lengthy evaluation, Syed Abbas read the following counter-fatwa issued from scholars in Iran:

Our Holy Koran tells us all children should receive education, including our daughters and sisters. Your noble work follows the highest principles of Islam, to tend to the poor and sick. In the Holy Koran there is no law to prohibit an infidel from providing assistance to our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Therefore, the decree concluded:

We direct all clerics in Pakistan not to interfere with your noble intentions. You have our permission, blessings, and prayers.

While Mortenson was busy building schools, the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Centers occurred, and Mortenson was informed that a "village called New York" was bombed. In the subsequent flurry of activity, Kevin Fedarko, a reporter

from *Parade* magazine, visited the region. He was so impressed with Mortenson's work that he wrote a story that appeared on the cover of the magazine<sup>1</sup> and said:

As the U.S. confronts Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, Greg Mortenson, 45, is quietly waging his own campaign against Islamic fundamentalists, who often recruit members through religious schools called madrasas. Mortenson's approach hinges on a simple idea: that by building secular schools and helping promote education—particularly for girls—in the world's most volatile war zone, support for the Taliban and other extremists sects eventually will dry up. ... 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 war will ultimately be won with books, not with bombs.

This publication opened the "flood gates." There was a huge reader response, the most the magazine ever experienced. Donations poured in, which led to establishment of a foundation and many other spin-off organizations.

In summary, Mortenson's work in a part of the world where Americans are, at best, misunderstood, and more often feared and loathed, this soft-spoken, 6-foot-4-inch former mountaineer has put together a string of improbable successes. He has single-handedly changed the lives of tens of thousands of children, and independently won more hearts and minds than all the official propaganda flooding the region.

An excellent example of his impact is the comment made by Haji Ali's granddaughter Jahan, the first girl from Haji Ali's family to attend and graduate from school:

I want to be such a woman that I can start a hospital, be an executive, and look over all the health problems of all the women in the Braldu. I want to become a very famous woman of this area—I want to be a 'Superlady.' (page 313)

*Three Cups of Tea* has been translated into other

languages and has been on the New York Times Bestseller List, received Time magazine's Asia Book of the Year Award, and other prizes. Further information regarding Mortenson's work may be obtained at Central Asia Institute, PO Box 7209, Bozeman, MT 59771, (406) 585-7841, [www.ikat.org](http://www.ikat.org)

#### **Reference**

1. Fedarko K. Parade cover story, April 3, 2003. Available from <http://www.parade.com/articles/>

[editions/2003/edition\\_04-06-2003/Greg\\_Mortenson.](#)

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