

Three Cups of Tea
One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . .
One School at a Time
by **Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin**

About the Book

“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, Korphe Village Chief, Karakoram Mountains, Pakistan

The astonishing, uplifting story of a real-life Indiana Jones and his remarkable humanitarian campaign in the Taliban's backyard.

In 1993 a mountaineer named Greg Mortenson drifted into an impoverished Pakistan village in the Karakoram mountains after a failed attempt to climb K2. Moved by the inhabitants' kindness, he promised to return and build a school. *Three Cups of Tea* is the story of that promise and its extraordinary outcome. Over the next decade Mortenson built not must one but fifty-five schools — especially for girls — in the forbidding terrain that gave birth to the Taliban. His story is at once a riveting adventure and a testament to the power of the humanitarian spirit.

Praise for the Book

“Greg Mortenson's dangerous and difficult quest . . . is not only a thrilling read, it's proof that one ordinary person, with the right combination of character and determination, really can change the world.”

— **Tom Brokaw**

“An inspiring chronicle . . . This is one protagonist who clearly deserves to be called a hero.”

— *People*

“Mortenson's mission is admirable, his conviction unassailable, his territory exotic.”

— *The Washington Post*

Courtesy of Penguin Group

About the Authors

Greg Mortenson

American Philanthropist (1957–)

Updated: 02/28/2008

Personal Information: Born 1957, in MN; son of Irvin and Jerene Mortenson; married Tara Bishop (a clinical psychologist); children: two.

Education: University of South Dakota, graduated, 1983.

Military/Wartime Service: U.S. Army; medic; received U.S. Army Commendation Medal.

Addresses: Home: Bozeman, MT. Office: Central Asia Institute, P.O. Box 7209, Bozeman, MT 59771.

E-mail: cai@ikat.org.

Career: Former emergency room nurse, San Francisco, CA; Central Asia Institute, Bozeman, MT, founder and executive director.

Awards: David Brower Conservation Award, American Alpine Club, 1998; Peacemaker Award, Montana Community Mediation Center, 2002; Golden Piton Award, *Climbing Magazine*, 2003, for humanitarian effort; Vincent Lombardi Champion Award, 2003, for humanitarian service; Peacemaker of the Year award, Benedictine Monks (Santa Fe, NM), 2003; Outdoor Person of the Year, *Outdoor Magazine*, 2003; Salzburg Seminar fellow, 2003; Freedom Forum Free Spirit Award, National Press Club, 2004; Jeanette Rankin Peace Award, Institute for Peace, 2004; Anti-Terror Award, *Men's Journal*, 2005; Humanitarian of the Year Award for Montana, Red Cross, 2005; Alumni Achievement Award, University of South Dakota, 2006; Kiriya Prize for non-fiction, 2007, for *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations — One School at a Time*

WRITINGS

- (With David Oliver Relin) *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations — One School at a Time* (autobiography), Viking (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor to books, including *Sustainable Development in Central Asia*, edited by Shirin Akiner and Sander Tideman, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1998; *The Difference a Day Makes: 365 Ways to Change Your World in Just 24 Hours*, edited by Karen Jones, New World Library (Novato, CA), 2005; and *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories for a Better World: 101 Stories to Make the World a Better Place*, edited by Jack Canfield, Health Communications (Deerfield Beach, FL), 2005.

Sidelights

In 1993, Greg Mortenson went to Pakistan to climb K2, the second-highest mountain in the world. He had no idea when he departed just how far the journey would take him. Mortenson failed to reach the summit, and then he was separated from his group and found himself lost during the descent. He wound up in a remote village in Pakistan begging for aid and shelter. The villagers took him in and cared for him until he was healthy enough to continue, and he promised to repay them by building a school for the village's children.

Mortenson returned to the United States, sold everything he owned, which netted him a mere two thousand dollars, and solicited donations until he had enough money to build that first school. After difficult negotiations with local officials and threats from local Muslim clerics, who were opposed to Mortenson's plan to educate girls as well as boys, Mortenson finally succeeded in opening the school. He then founded the Central Asia Institute, which built dozens more. By 2006 the institute had sponsored fifty-five schools, which served 24,000 children in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia.

This story is told in *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations — One School at a Time*, which Mortenson wrote with journalist David Oliver Relin. The book presents "a fresh perspective on the cultures and development efforts of Central Asia," Vanessa Bush noted in *Booklist*, as well as an "incredible story of a humanitarian endeavor." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic dubbed *Three Cups of Tea* "inspiring [and] adventure-filled," while a *Publishers Weekly* contributor concluded that the "captivating and suspenseful . . . book will win many readers' hearts."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS

- Mortenson, Greg, and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations — One School at a Time*, Viking (New York, NY), 2006.

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, March 15, 2006, Vanessa Bush, review of *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations — One School at a Time*, p. 9.
- *California Bookwatch*, April, 2006, review of *Three Cups of Tea*.
- *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, May 4, 2006, "One Man's Fight to Educate Girls in Central Asia."
- *Entertainment Weekly*, March 10, 2006, Timothy Gunatilaka, review of *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 73.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, February 1, 2006, review of *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 124.
- *Parade Magazine*, April 6, 2003, Kevin Fedarko, "He Fights Terror with Books."
- *People Weekly*, March 20, 2006, Maria Speidel, review of *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 65.

- *Publishers Weekly*, March 1, 2004, John F. Baker, “Viking Senior Editor Ray Roberts Won an Auction for a Book by Mountaineer Greg Mortenson,” p. 14; January 9, 2006, review of *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 45.

ONLINE

- *Freedom Forum*, <http://www.freedomforum.com/> (July 12, 2004), brief biography of Greg Mortenson.
- *Greg Mortenson Home Page*, <http://www.gregmortenson.com> (August 30, 2006).
- *Three Cups of Tea Web site*, <http://www.threecupsoftea.com> (August 30, 2006).
- *Volvo for Life Awards*, <http://www.volvoforlifeawards.com/> (August 30, 2006), brief biography of Greg Mortenson.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2008

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

David Oliver Relin

American Journalist (1963?–)

Updated: 05/03/2007

Personal Information: Born c. 1963.

Education: Vassar College, graduated.

Addresses: Home: Portland, OR.

Career: Journalist. Former senior news editor for *react* (weekly magazine).

Awards: Teaching/writing fellowship, Iowa Writers Workshop; Michener fellowship, 1992, for writing about Vietnam; Kiriya Prize for non-fiction, 2007, for *Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations — One School at a Time*; over forty awards for his work as a writer and editor.

WRITINGS

- (With Greg Mortenson) *Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations — One School at a Time*, Viking (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Parade* magazine and *Skiing* magazine.

Contributing editor, *Parade* and *Skiing*.

SIDELIGHTS

(see entry under Greg Mortenson)

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, March 15, 2006, Vanessa Bush, review of *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations — One School at a Time*, p. 9.
- *California Bookwatch*, April, 2006, review of *Three Cups of Tea*.
- *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, May 4, 2006, "One Man's Fight to Educate Girls in Central Asia."
- *Entertainment Weekly*, March 10, 2006, Timothy Gunatilaka, review of *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 73.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, February 1, 2006, review of *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 124.
- *People*, March 20, 2006, Maria Speidel, review of *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 65.
- *Publishers Weekly*, March 1, 2004, John F. Baker, "Viking Senior Editor Ray Roberts Won an Auction for a Book by Mountaineer Greg Mortenson," p. 14; January 9, 2006, review of *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 45.

ONLINE

- *Wordstock*, <http://www.wordstock.com/> (August 30, 2006), brief biography of David Oliver Relin.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Author Interview

Q: It's been more than 10 years since you first started your project to build a school in the Pakistani village of Korphe. Are you satisfied with what has been accomplished so far?

Greg Mortenson: The more I do this, I feel I'm very blessed. And I feel my life is very rich, because I can go between two different cultures [the U.S. and Pakistan] and people of different backgrounds. And everywhere I go I find there are good people. We fail to appreciate the fact that we can be optimists. We're very pessimistic now.

Americans need to form bridges and have relationships with the moderate Muslim majority who are our greatest allies there. And I also hear Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders all saying, "God is on our side." Actually, God is on the side of the widow and the orphan and the refugee. But most of all we need to take care and have compassion and love those who need that the most.

Q: What is it that makes you different from all the Americans who have been to Pakistan, who make promises — diplomats and humanitarians and climbers — and they don't keep them?

GM: I think I was fortunate that I had my childhood in Tanzania, East Africa. It was a very rich, pluralistic, diverse environment, where I went to school with children of all faiths and backgrounds, and for me that was a normal way to live. When I came back to the States at the end of high school, I was exposed for the first time to bigotry and racism and intolerance.

I joined the military, actually, because we didn't have any money to go to college. And it was very difficult for me to make that transition. And I think today we are less bilingual. People stress in schools less geography, less social studies, and that's imperative to living in a global society today. Because we're so connected.

Q: But you kept your promises when a lot of other people don't.

GM: Well, that's true. I went to Pakistan [1993] to climb K2, the world's second-highest mountain, because I had a sister named Christa who had severe epilepsy. In 1992 she died in her sleep. And she had a little amber necklace that I wanted to take to the top of the mountain in her memory. I worked hard, but I didn't quite get to the top, and then coming down I stumbled into this village [Korphe].

I saw 84 children sitting in the dirt writing with sticks in the sand, and [was struck by] their sincerity and their fierce determination to have an education — their teacher wasn't in the village that day because they couldn't afford his daily one-dollar salary. And so I made a promise that day. It took me three years and many mistakes.

[In Pakistan] I was the “big *Angrezi* (white man)” trying to help the people. I was determined; I was going to make it happen. And one day the village chief, Haji Ali, who was a very devout man, took me by the wayside and said, “We’re grateful to Allah Almighty that you’ve come to help us build a school. You’ve made your promise, and you’re keeping it. But you need to do one thing. You need to be quiet, sit down, and let us do the work. And Allah Almighty will guide us.”

And then he took all my receipts and records — he had a little key around his neck — and he locked them up in his little drawer along with his prayer beads and his ibex meat. And then he said, “There now, Inshallah everything will be ok.”

Q: And it was?

GM: And of course in six weeks the school was done. And I had to let go, and it was an important lesson. I had to let the community and their faith become the driving force of their school. And that’s what we [Central Asia Institute] do now. We provide skilled labor and the teacher training. But the villagers provide the sweat equity and resources and land. So it’s kind of a 50-50 thing.

And we’ve also been able to [build schools] in some of the more difficult areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan [in spite of] some despotic mullahs who are in the minority. I’ve had two fatwas against me.

The first one was from a Shiite imam who said I was an infidel working in their midst. And that one went to Iran to the council of ayatollahs. And about eight months later a letter came back in a red velvet box. And they summoned me to the mosque. I thought, “This is it. I’m getting booted out of Pakistan.”

Instead, they opened this box, and it was an ornate letter written in Farsi, and it said, “Dear compassionate of the poor, we have reviewed your case, and in our holy Qur’an education is encouraged for all children. And furthermore what you are doing to help our people is in the highest principles of Islam. We give you our permission and our blessings and support. And nobody should interfere with your work.”

Of course, after that we got dozens of [requests to build] schools.

Q: You speak in the book of lessons you’ve learned from those you’ve met and worked with along the way. What were the lasting lessons?

GM: I think the first lesson is that it’s about the relationships. I say it takes three cups of tea to do business there. The first cup you’re a stranger; the second cup, a friend; the third cup you’re family. But the process takes several years. And here in America we have 12-second sound bites and two-minute football drills and 30-minute power lunches, but we

really don't appreciate the strength of relationships. We are in a transient society. People don't often know their neighbors, or they haven't seen or talked to their siblings or parents.

And I think the faith of Islam is [more] about tolerance, and it's about justice. But more than that, it's that we live in a global community, and we should have compassion and respect for all people. And I see that there's been a few extremists who hijacked that somewhat.

But on the other hand there's even more ignorance here in America. And that ignorance is caused by fear. And that fear brings hatred. And until we overcome our fears and our unwillingness to reach out, then all of this is in vain.

I don't do this to fight terror. I do this to promote peace and fight ignorance and illiteracy.

Q: Do you think you can balance the religious with the secular education for these children?

GM: I think so. There's a big struggle going on now in Pakistan, in that the government curriculum standards for Islamic studies are [based] in Sunni doctrine. And the Shi'as who are in the north have rioted about it. It's caused a significant number of fatalities in the past three years.

So what we've done in our schools, especially in the areas where there are both Sunnis and Shi'as, is that we have both of their elders who come in and teach the students about their different backgrounds. And it does work very well. It creates more dialogue rather than fighting.

The media in the U.S. have spread some very big misperceptions. Most madrassas — I'd probably say 99 percent of madrassas — are good madrassas. And they teach the kids about their faith and Islam and about hygiene and other subjects. Unfortunately there are a few extremist madrassas that have been set up in the last 20–25 years that are more radical.

But we have the same thing here in the states. Very recently we've had some of the very conservative Christian leaders say very negative things about Islam or about other faiths.

Q: How do you balance your spirituality with the difficulties you — and all the children in the northern Pakistan and in Afghanistan — face?

GM: In our technological society, [everything] we do is controlled in our microcosm. We turn an alarm clock off, we switch a light on, or we turn a heater or an air conditioner on. Everything is controlled. And in an impoverished area, it's the other way around. You're at the mercy of your environment and your lack of financial resources and opportunity.

And when you grow up in that environment, you become more in tune with your faith, and you have to rely on that — your inner voice. That consciousness is very strong. Often I ask the children, or the elderly, “Why are you doing this?” They’ll say, “This is what Allah wants,” or “This is what is right.”

Over here if you ask that question to somebody, they’ll say, “Well, I’m doing this because if I do that, then this will happen and it will lead me here.” It’s very linear. Over there they rely on their faith and consciousness I guess you could say — thinking from your heart.

Q: Has that become stronger for you also?

GM: Well, certainly. The more I do this, I rely on my conscious and my faith. It often drives people here a little bit crazy. But I realized that things can work, especially when you have a dedication to something, and you’re driven by your heart and your compassion for something

Q: You are often referred to as hero. Do you think you are a hero?

GM: I don’t think I’m a hero. My heroes are the children going to school. My daughter, Amira, she wrote a song [with her music teacher] called “Three Cups of Tea.” It talks of the heroes writing with “sticks in the sand.” And it talks about how the real heroes are the children. There’s one thing that makes me feel so incredibly proud and joyous — it’s watching that first girl going down the trail into the school. [Mortenson’s schools are for boys and girls, but girls’ education is more emphasized.]

That first brave girl, I know what’s it’s taken to get on that path. It’s dealing with the elders, some cultural bias, or the mullahs. But most often she does have the support of the community. Watching that first girl is like watching man taking his first step on the moon — one giant leap for mankind.

Behind that girl comes dozens more girls, eventually hundreds and thousands. And when that girl becomes a mother, her values are instilled in the community. So I don’t think of myself as a hero. I think if this as just — I’m a dedicated person. To me, my real heroes are every child that I can watch reading and writing for the first time. It’s such a joyous thing to watch.

Courtesy of Beliefnet.com

Discussion Questions

1. There is a telling passage about Mortenson's change of direction at the start of the book: "One evening, he went to bed by a yak dung fire a mountaineer who'd lost his way, and one morning, by the time he'd shared a pot of butter tea with his hosts and laced up his boots, he'd become a humanitarian who'd found a meaningful path to follow for the rest of his life." What made Mortenson particularly ripe for such a transformation? Has anything similar happened in your own life?
2. Relin gives a "warts and all" portrait of Mortenson, showing him as a hero but also as a flawed human being with some exasperating traits. Talk about how Relin chose to write about Mortenson's character — his choice of details, his perspective, the way he constructs scenes. Is Mortenson someone you'd like to get to know, work with, or have as a neighbor or friend?
3. At the heart of the book is a powerful but simple political message: we each as individuals have the power to change the world, one cup of tea at a time. Yet the book powerfully dramatizes the obstacles in the way of this philosophy: bloody wars waged by huge armies, prejudice, religious extremism, cultural barriers. What do you think of the "one cup of tea at a time" philosophy? Do you think Mortenson's vision can work for lasting and meaningful change?
4. Have you ever known anyone like Mortenson? Have you ever had the experience of making a difference yourself through acts of generosity, aid, or leadership?
5. The Balti people are fierce yet extremely hospitable, kind yet rigid, determined to better themselves yet stuck in the past. Discuss your reactions to them and the other groups that Mortenson tries to help.
6. After Haji Ali's family saves Greg's life, he reflects that he could never "imagine discharging the debt he felt to his hosts in Korphe." Discuss this sense of indebtedness as key to Mortenson's character. Why was Mortenson compelled to return to the region again and again? In your opinion, does he repay his debt by the end of the book?
7. References to paradise run throughout the book — Mortenson's childhood home in Tanzania, the mountain scenery, even Berkeley, California, are all referred to as "paradise." Discuss the concept of paradise, lost and regained, and how it influences Mortenson's mission.

8. Mortenson's transition from climbing bum to humanitarian hero seems very abrupt. However, looking back, it's clear that his sense of mission is rooted in his childhood, the values of his parents, and his relationship with his sister Christa. Discuss the various facets of Mortenson's character — the freewheeling mountain climber, the ER nurse, the devoted son and brother, and the leader of a humanitarian cause. Do you view him as continuing the work his father began?
9. "I expected something like this from an ignorant village mullah, but to get those kinds of letters from my fellow Americans made me wonder whether I should just give up," Mortenson remarked after he started getting hate mail in the wake of September 11. What was your reaction to the letters Mortenson received?
10. Mortenson hits many bumps in the road — he's broke, his girlfriend dumps him, he is forced to build a bridge before he can build the school, his health suffers, and he drives his family crazy. Discuss his repeated brushes with failure and how they influenced your opinion of Mortenson and his efforts.
11. The authors write that "the Balti held the key to a kind of uncomplicated happiness that was disappearing in the developing world." This peaceful simplicity of life seems to be part of what attracts Mortenson to the villagers. Discuss the pros and cons of bringing "civilization" to the mountain community.
12. Much of the book is a meditation on what it means to be a foreigner assimilating with another culture. Discuss your own experiences with foreign cultures — things that you have learned, mistakes you have made, misunderstandings you have endured.
13. Did the book change your views toward Islam or Muslims? Consider the cleric Syed Abbas, and also the cleric who called a fatwa on Mortenson. Syed Abbas implores Americans to "look into our hearts and see that the great majority of us are not terrorists, but good and simple people." Discuss this statement. Has the book inspired you to learn more about the region?

Courtesy of Penguin Group