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### Power of the Humanitarian Spirit in Greg Mortenson's Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace... One School at a Time

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#### ABSTRACT

Three Cups of Tea is the true story of one of the most extraordinary humanitarian missions of our time. An uplifting story of how one person can spark a revolution of giving and reach the lives of thousands. In 1993, a young American mountain climber named Greg Mortenson stumbles into a tiny village high in Pakistan's beautiful and desperately poor Karakoram Himalaya Region. Sick, exhausted, and depressed after a failing to scale the summit of K2, Mortenson regains his strength and his will to live thanks to the generosity of the people of the village korphe. Before he leaves, he makes a vow that will profoundly change both the villagers' lives and his own- will return and build them a school. NBC's Tom Brokaw rightly said Three Cups of Tea is one of the most remarkable adventure stories of our time.

#### 1. Introduction

Greg Mortenson's dangerous and difficult quest to build schools in the wildest parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan is not only a thrilling read, it is a proof that one ordinary person, with the right combination of character and determination, really can change the world. "He [my Dad] taught me, he taught all of us, that if you believe in yourself, you can accomplish anything." (38) Mortenson came to understand that a woman is more likely than a man to go back to her village to help its development. When a woman is educated, her children are more likely to be educated, her family is more likely to be

healthy and well-fed, and she with her babe are less likely to die during childbirth. These revelations, as experienced the discourse surrounding girls' education in developing countries. Mortenson initially approached Karakoram as a climber and he never lost the mountaineer's appreciation for the region's austere beauty and incredible physical challenges. Mortenson made enemies along the way and frustrated his friends and family. In the course of his narrative, readers come to know Mortenson as a fiend, a husband and father, a travelling companion, a son and brother and also as a flawed human being.

Greg Mortenson is an American humanitarian, professional speaker, writer, and former mountaineer who was born in 1957, and grew up on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. His father, Dempsey, founded Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Center (KCMC) a hospital, and mother, Jerene, founded the International School Moshi. He served in the U.S. Army in Germany, where he received the Army Commendation Medal, and later graduated from the University of South Dakota in 1983. In July 1992, Mortenson's sister, Christa, died from a massive seizure after a lifelong struggle with epilepsy on the eve of a trip to visit Dysersville, Iowa, where the baseball movie, 'Field of Dreams', was filmed in a cornfield.

To honor his sister's memory, in 1993, Mortenson climbed Pakistan's K2, the world's second highest mountain in the Karakoram Range. While recovering from the climb in a village called Korphe, Mortenson met a group of children sitting in the dirt writing with sticks in the sand, and made a promise to help them build a school. From that rash promise, grew a humanitarian campaign, in which Mortenson has dedicated his life to promote education, especially for girls, in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. His work has not been without difficulty. In 1996, he survived an eight-day armed kidnapping by the Taliban in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province tribal areas, escaped a 2003 firefight with feuding Afghan warlords by hiding for eight hours under putrid animal hides in a truck going to a leather-tanning factory. He has overcome two fatwas from enraged Islamic mullahs, endured CIA investigations, and also received threats from fellow Americans after 9/11, for helping Muslim children with education.

Mortenson has received so many awards and honours. US Army Commendation medal in the year 1975, American Alpine Club David Brower Conservation Award in the year 1998, Peacemaker Award from Montana Community Mediation Center in the year 2002, Climbing Magazine "Golden Piton Award" for humanitarian effort and Vincent Lombardi Champion Award for humanitarian service and Peacemaker of the Year" Benedictine Monks, Santa Fe, NM and Outdoor Person of the Year - Outdoor Magazine in the year 2003.

Mortenson describes the origins of his humanitarian work in his book, *Three Cups of Tea*. He states that he travelled to northern Pakistan in 1993 to climb the world's second-highest mountain, K2, as a memorial to his sister, Christa.

## **2. The Female Literacy**

In three cups of tea, Mortenson and Relin take readers behind the headline to reveal the true heart and soul of this explosive region and to show how one man's promise might be enough to change the world. The war –torn mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan appear in the news as the breeding grounds of terrorist training camps, Al Qaeda hide-outs and fierce religious extremism. Relin does not shy away from depicting the man's exasperating qualities such as restlessness, disorganization, sleeplessness, and utter disregard for punctuality. But Mortenson never asks others to make sacrifices that he has not already made himself time and time again. This is clearly understood from "This harsh and splendid land, with snow-covered rock mountains, cold-crystal streams, Deep forests of cypress, juniper and ash, is as much my body as what you see before you here. I cannot be separated from this or from you. Our many hearts have only a single beat." (70)

Greg Mortenson was one of the first development workers to understand the importance of girls' education. He was building schools so that girls would have a chance to getting an education and providing girls scholarships to pursue advanced degrees well before the Millennium Development Goals made it a global priority. Although Mortenson's goals in the beginning of *Three Cups of Tea* center around building schools, the story becomes the most poignant when he begins focusing on female education. What Mortenson saw from the start that most development workers did not was that the most meaningful change occurs when the entire community is involved-including its women. It is easy to overlook the traditional Muslim societies where they are often kept out of sight and silence.

The female literacy rates in some of these countries are so much lower. So, people naturally have the doubt that this resistance to women's education rooted in Islam. But Mortenson having studied the Holy Koran explained that, the first word of the revelation to Muhammad the Prophet is the Arabic word *iqra*. And *iqra* means "read." The first two chapters of the revelation implore that all people have a quest for knowledge. And this is really what the Koran is about, about tolerance, about respect for all people, and also about education and literacy.

There is nowhere in the Koran that says girls can't go to school. In fact, it advocates that all people have a quest for knowledge. Also, in the Holy Koran, which is may be of relevance after 9/11, when a young man or anyone goes on jihad, he or she first needs to get permission from his mother or her mother. If a man doesn't get permission from his mother, it's very shameful or

disgraceful. So, if a man goes on jihad and he hasn't gotten his mother's blessings, then his jihad is not a noble jihad, and if he becomes a shahid, which means a martyr, he won't get the benefit of what the Koran accords a shahid. That became after 9/11.

The Taliban actually had a high desertion rate. The central core of the Taliban is only about 25,000 people, and then may be about 60,000 kind of loose adherents, getting paid to be jihadists or fighters for the Taliban. After 9/11, but before the U.S. and coalition forces came into Afghanistan, they had a very hard time getting recruits. So, they were going into villages to try and get recruits at gunpoint to fight against the imminent invasion or intervention. But they were mainly targeting illiterate, impoverished societies, because educated women were refusing to allow their sons to join the Taliban.

When a woman has education, she is much less likely to condone her son to get into violence or into terrorism. They fear that if that young girl grows up, she becomes a mother that the value of education will go on in the community and they have lost their ideological way to really control the society. In the world today, there are 145 million children who are deprived of education due to slavery, poverty, religious extremism, gender discrimination, corrupt governments. If we wanted to, we could give the gift of education literacy to every single child on the planet. Women could be empowered in such a tremendous way.

Education has an effect on the lives of girls. When girls first learn to read and write, they often go home and teach their mothers how to read and write. Their mothers then can start writing letters to their extended family. When a woman is married, often their maternal ties are severed. And so, through letter writing there's no cell phone or e-mail or any other way they can communicate with their families.

### **3. Establishment Of Korphe School**

In 1993, mountaineer 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, he built not one but 55 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.

"We share in the sorrow as people weep and suffer in America today as we inaugurate this school. Those who have committed this evil act against the innocent, the women and children, to create thousands of widows and orphans do not do so in the name of Islam... I request America to look into our hearts and see that the great majority of us are not terrorists, but good and simple

people. Our land is stricken with poverty because we are without education. But today, another candle of knowledge has been lit." (257)

In his speech at the inauguration of the Kuardu Primary School, Syed Abbas presents a humanistic, compassionate response to the September 11th attacks, while also confirming his own (and locals') appreciation for education itself. Like Mortenson, he believes that education is the only antidote to extremism and violence.

With the construction of the Korphe School wrapping up, Mortenson moves onto Waziristan to find the next site for his school. He is in Peshawar, the capital of "Pakistan's wild west." Here, Mortenson witnesses the growth of the Taliban, or "students of Islam," the army of teenagers' intent to knock Afghanistan's rulers out of power. Meanwhile, Osama bin Laden has just come to Afghanistan, blaming Americans for his exile from Saudi Arabia, and urges his followers to attack and harm Americans at any chance possible. It is a volatile time for an American in the region.

At his hotel, he meets BadamGul, a man from Waziristan who offers to take Mortenson to his home village. The morning they set out, Gul backs out but sends Mortenson with a driver, Mr. Khan. After many hours of driving, Mortenson and Mr. Khan are invited into the home of a tribe leader, Haji Mirza, where they feast on lamb and are offered a place to sleep. But in the middle of the night, Mortenson is awakened and kidnapped. He is held captive in a small room with nothing to do but read an old copy of Time magazine. Several days into his captivity, he is visited by a man who calls himself "Khan," a Wazir man who learned English from a British school in Peshawar. Mortenson tells him of his work in the Baltistan and his intention to build more schools in Pakistan. He also tells Khan that his wife is about to give birth, but he lies, saying it is a boy when he knows it is in fact a girl. Early the next morning, Mortenson is released and, to his great surprise, given hundreds of rupees by his former captors, to build schools. "At first, when I began to attend school, many people in my village told me a girl has no business doing such a thing," Shakeela says (207). When a 14-year-old girl was shot in the head for claiming her birth right of acquiring education and standing against oppression, the gory incident was surely to hit Greg Mortenson like a Sky bolt who has now spent a good two decades of his life educating the young girls of the Central Asia. Malala Yousafzai, a school girl from the restive Swat region, made the headlines some two years ago for having the courage to go to school in the midst of all the bombing and bloodshed in her otherwise picturesque town. She challenged the militants and the religious fanatics and shrugged off all threats to continue her education thereby inviting the wrath of the outlaw fanatics.

Heading to his mosque soon after another Inge or Aiko wandered into his sights, Changazi petitioned his mullah for permission to make a muthaa, or temporary marriage...

Mortenson asked if Balti women whose husbands were away could also be granted muthaa. "No, of course not," Changazi said, wagging his head at the naïveté of Mortenson's question, before offering him a biscotti to dunk in his tea. (110)

Mortenson's effort in organizing the construction of the Korphe school seems, at first, Sisyphean. His associate, Changazi Khan, pilfers some of his hard-bought supplies, before leading him to a nearby village whose council tries to convince Mortenson that he had promised them a school. Mortenson briefly loses faith in the people of this region, feeling as if, to them, he is less a person than a source of cash flow, before putting those feelings aside and spearheading the construction of more schools.

"Osama, baah!" Bashir roared. 'Osama is not a product of Pakistan or Afghanistan. He is a creation of America. Thanks to America, Osama is in every home... You have to attack the source of your enemy's strength. In America's case, that's not Osama or Saddam or anyone else. The enemy is ignorance. The only way to defeat it is to build relationships with these people, to draw them into the modern world with education and business. Otherwise, the fight will go on forever.'" (310)

Brigadier General Baz is responding here to videos on CNN from Baghdad, featuring the American invasion there. He is greatly frustrated with America's misdirected military aggression, arguing that the killing of Muslims in Iraq will only further inflame the Muslim world for generations to come. He knows, as Mortenson does, that the true enemy is ignorance, and the only way to stem the violence is to provide a balanced education to young people in the Pakistan/Afghanistan region to prevent their being recruited by the madrassas.

"Let's be honest," says Tom Vaughn. 'The fact is the CAI is Greg. I didn't mind rubber-stamping whatever he wanted to work on. But without Greg, the CAI is finished. ...I began to get angry about the terrible way he took care of himself. He stopped climbing and exercising. He stopped sleeping. He began to gain so much weight he didn't even look like a mountaineer anymore. I understand that he decided to pour everything into his work,' Vaughn says, 'but if he drops dead of a heart attack what's the point?'" (230) Dr. Vaughn articulates here the fundamental problem with the organizational structure of CAI. Tasks are not allocated evenly, and Mortenson relies not on experts, but on rather random people he meets along the way (taxi drivers, porters) to help him accomplish CAI's goals. It is not a sustainable way of conducting business. This passage also highlights Mortenson's tendency to get so involved with events in Pakistan that he physically suffers for it. This becomes a point of contention in his marriage, too, and Tara Bishop exhorts him to work less and make sure to carve out time with his family.

#### 4. The Interaction Of Politics And Mortenson's Mission

The interaction of politics and Mortenson's mission crescendoes in this chapter. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 broadcast to the world the danger of the Taliban. They put Mortenson in greater danger in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as bombs fall from the sky and leave thousands of civilians hurt or dead. They also make Mortenson's mission more imperative than ever his work, he believes, gives children opportunities beyond madrassas and militant extremism. Mortenson's mission, accordingly, expands he serves as an ambassador and informant about the region. He is a leading expert on Pakistan. He educates his interrogators in Katmandu, he speaks to Congress, and he meets with military analysts. Because his work has become intertwined with a war that dominates the United States' resources and attention, he no longer just builds schools, but also speaks on behalf of the thousands of innocent Muslims that many Americans have demonized. In these chapters, Mortenson has shifted from an impulsive humanitarian to a professional, a leader, and an ambassador. He briefs high-level government officials, including the Secretary of State; he speaks to the press; he watches firsthand the consequences of 9/11 and the War on Terror. The stakes are much higher for him, as his life is often in danger. He thus becomes an expert and a professional.

As these major political events unfold, however, Mortenson remains true to his roots and core mission. When he learns of the death of Haji Ali, for example, he is reminded that he must continue to serve the children of the region. The passing of his mentor and hero further represents Mortenson's growth, but does not distance him from his or the CAI's mission. This is best represented by his commitment to paying Uzra Faizal after learning she has not been paid. Even as he speaks to Congress, he thinks of Faizal and recommits to correcting these injustices as well as he can. It is, perhaps, one of the greatest highlights and a distillation of all of Mortenson's hard work when Jahan makes her requests for tuition for medical training. She embodies all that Mortenson strives to develop in his female students, especially the lesson not to take a backseat to men. It is a revolutionary moment, disintegrating centuries' worth of barriers to women's equality. Haji Ali arguably provided the impetus for Mortenson to create the school, and it must be particularly gratifying for Mortenson to see the bloom of opportunity and verve in Haji Ali's own granddaughter.

## 5. Conclusion

In *Three Cups of Tea*, Mortenson relates the story of his unlikely transformation from mountaineer to cofounder and executive director of the Central Asia Institute (CAI) and adviser to senior military leaders. That transformation began in 1993 after his failed attempt to climb K2, a peak in northeastern Pakistan and, at 28, 267 feet, the world's second highest mountain and the most difficult to climb. During the descent, he became separated from his group, suffered from exposure, and stumbled into the Balti village of Korphe. The family of Haji Ali, the village's chief elder, nursed him back to health. Appreciating what the villagers had done for him and recognizing the value they placed on education, he promised to build a school for their 84 children.

A man of modest means who supported his mountain climbing habit with his income as an emergency room nurse, Mortenson had to find sponsors who could finance the school in Korphe. He met Jean Hoerni, a Silicon Valley pioneer, who donated the \$12,000 Mortenson needed for the project. Construction of the school, which involved working with the village's elders and using local labor, did so much to create beneficial relationships and develop his reputation that elders in nearby villages asked Mortenson to help build schools in their communities as well. Despite Mortenson's desire to help, lack of resources presented a problem. Hoerni, who was dying from leukemia, helped solve it by co-founding the CAI with Mortenson and endowing it with enough money to build additional schools in rural Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Since then, the scale of Mortenson's and the CAI's efforts has increased exponentially. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, the institute has funded and organized the building of over 144 schools by local villagers in coordination with their elders. It underwrites those schools and their approximately 1,200 teachers, who have educated more than 64,000 students (including 52,000 girls). Additionally, the CAI has helped with women's education, public health, and conservation projects. By making a difference in the quality of life in that region, both the institute and Mortenson have earned the respect of the villagers. Consequently, Mortenson and his CAI team were able to set up more than 35 meetings throughout Afghanistan between village elders and General McChrystal and his senior staff.

Greg Mortenson and CAI have worked with communities in the mountainous, remote, and often war-wracked areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan since 1996 to establish over 300 educational and community support initiatives, including literacy centers, school buildings, vocational centers, scholarship programs, and public health (potable water, midwifery, and disaster-relief) initiatives. Being the Co-Founder and caretaker of the CAI, Mortenson carries out whirlwind tours around the world and in the US to collect funds for his



organization, giving out lectures narrating his own story. CAI and Mortenson were recently acquitted in a lawsuit which claimed that Mortenson has usurped the donations amounting to millions of dollars. The court rejected the accusations and relieved the CAI from an 18month-long gruesome battle of integrity.

Now schools been established in pretty volatile areas, some of the Taliban areas, the first girls' high schools in four provinces of Afghanistan. There are many Taliban around, but able to build schools because of the relationships with the local people. They are able to talk to the Taliban, and so the Taliban are reluctant to attack the schools.

The book traces how Mortenson kept his promise in the high court of Pakistan and Afghanistan, despite considerable odds. The region is remote and dangerous, a notorious breeding ground for Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists. In the course of his work, Mortenson was kidnapped and threatened with death. He endured local rivalries, deep misunderstandings, jealousy, and corruption, not to mention treacherous roads and epic weather. But he believed passionately that balanced, non-extremist education, for boys and girls alike, is the most effective way to combat the violent intolerance that breeds terrorism.

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