

## **GREG MORTENSON**

### **THREE CUPS OF TEA:**

One Man's Mission to Promote Peace .....One School at a Time

Penguin 2007, by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin

[www.threecupsoftea.com](http://www.threecupsoftea.com)

As of April 2008, Three Cups of Tea has been a New York Times bestseller for over 58 weeks, selling over 1 million copies. Three Cups of Tea has received the following literary awards:

- Kiriyaama Prize - Nonfiction Award
- Time Magazine - Asia Book of The Year
- Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association - Nonfiction Award
- Borders Bookstore - Original Voices Selection
- Banff Mountain Festival - Book Award Finalist
- Montana Honor Book Award
- Dayton Literary Peace Prize (nonfiction) – Runner Up

Mortenson's message of promoting peace through education and literacy (especially for girls) has been highly sought out since the publication of Three Cups of Tea. Since 2006, he has visited over two hundred cities, speaking to sell-out crowds from 1-5,000 across America, and including diverse groups such as the Pentagon, Air Force and Naval Academy, Capital Hill, think tanks, book clubs, women's groups, churches, mosques, synagogues, and other places of worship, outdoor groups, civic groups, the American Library Association keynote, AAUW keynote, Epilepsy foundations, medical, education and literacy conferences, and more.

His work has not been without difficulty. In 1996, he survived an eight day armed kidnapping by the Taliban, in the Northwest Frontier Province NWFP tribal areas of Pakistan, 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 fatwehs from enraged Islamic mullahs for educating girls, endured CIA investigations, and also received hate mail and death threats from fellow Americans after 9/11, for his work to help Muslim children with education.

Mortenson is a living hero to rural communities of Afghanistan and Pakistan, where he has gained the trust of Islamic leaders, military commanders, government officials and tribal chiefs from his tireless effort to champion education, especially for girls.

He is one of few foreigners who has worked extensively for fifteen years (spending over 68 months) in the region now considered the front lines of the war on terror.

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**K2 is one of the most difficult, dangerous mountains in the world to climb. How did you get into climbing ? What did you do to prepare for this adventure?**

I grew up on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania, East Africa from 1958 to 1973, where my father founded Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Center [www.kcmc.ac.tz](http://www.kcmc.ac.tz) and my mother started Moshi International school [www.ismoshi.org/index.htm](http://www.ismoshi.org/index.htm) It was paradise for an ideal childhood.

As a child, I could always see the giant massif of Kilimanjaro (Africa's highest mountain 19,342 ft.) out my bedroom window, and longed to climb it. For my twelfth birthday, my father let me climb Kilimanjaro. In October 1969, at age eleven, I climbed Kilimanjaro with another eleven year old, Kevin Dawson, with one guide—we gagged and puked our way all the way to the summit. We were the youngest children to ever reach the summit until thirty years later. That began my love for the mountains.

To climb K2 in 1993 took a massive commitment, financially, physically and mentally. I spent a year preparing for it, had to raise about \$10,000, train over 4 hours a day, and commit all my time to this.

**What inspired you to commit to building a school in Pakistan?**

I had a sister named Christa, who struggled with severe epilepsy from early childhood, but she never once complained and inspired all of us. She had always wanted to go to Dyersville, Iowa, to see the “Field Of Dreams” where the baseball movie was filmed. Her bags were packed and she was ready to go when my mother went down to wake her up on the morning of July 23<sup>rd</sup>, but she had died in her sleep.

To honor Christa's memory, I decided to climb Pakistan's K2, the world's second highest mountain, and one of the most difficult to climb. After 78 days on the mountain, I did not quite reach the summit, and was exhausted, emaciated, and emotionally spent. On the five day way back to civilization, I stumbled into a local village named Korphe, where the Balti ethnic villagers helped nurse me back to health.

When I went to see the local school, I saw 84 children sitting in the dirt doing their school lessons. Most were writing with sticks in the dirt, and they shared only seven slate boards. Yet, despite abject poverty, I felt their fierce desire to have an education, and saw their spirits soar. At that moment, I realized that I had not come to Pakistan to climb a mountain, but to help the children build a school to honor Christa.

**How did the funding for the schools come about?**

It took a tremendous effort. When I returned home after K2 in late 1993, I needed to raise \$12,000 to build a school, but had no clue how to do it.

I went to the local library and looked up the names and addresses of hundreds of wealthy people and celebrities. At the time I was computer illiterate, so I first hand-typed 580 letters asking them for help. Only one person, Tom Brokaw, the newscaster, replied with a \$100 check. Then I wrote 16 grants, which were all turned down. Finally, I sold everything I owned, including my climbing gear, car, and cashed in my retirement policy. For the first two years, I was essentially homeless and gave up everything I had to get this off the ground.

By spring of 1994, I had only raised about \$3,000, and was frustrated. My mother, Jerene, who was the principal at Westside Elementary School in River Falls, Wisconsin, invited me to spend a couple days with the 600 students there. A fourth grader named Jeffrey, and two teachers started a “Pennies for Pakistan” drive after I left, which I did not think much about. Within six weeks, the Westside children had raised 62,340 pennies! Their pennies eventually inspired adults to give, but it was really children who started all this.

**Since 9/11, your work has expanded into Afghanistan, how did that come about?**

In 2001, I was in a remote village called Zuudkhan, of Charpusan Valley, in the extreme north of Pakistan—next to Afghanistan where we were putting in a drinking water system. One day, several fierce looking, armed Kyrgyz (tribal group) horsemen came across an 18,400 difficult mountain pass and into our midst. They said they were looking for me and that their warlord commanders, Abdul Rashid Khan and Sardhar Khan, had sent them to ask me to build schools for them in remote Afghanistan. They then made me pledge I would honor a promise to help them. Two years later, I made it to their villages and in 2004; we completed the first school in the Wakhan corridor of extreme NE Afghanistan, and have nine schools in Afghanistan now.

**How many schools have you established in Pakistan and Afghanistan?**

Sixty four schools in total, which have helped over 26,000 children, including 16,000 females. with education. There are fifty-five in Pakistan and eight in Afghanistan. A dozen more are under construction.

We could have many more schools if we worked in urban or easy to access areas, but most of our efforts are focused in remote, rural, difficult to access and underserved regions, where children, and especially girls are deprived of education. In some areas, our nonprofit organization, Central Asia Institute, is the only foreign aid group there.

**Your mission, to counteract extremism and terrorism by opening schools throughout the breeding ground of the Taliban is awe inspiring. By replacing guns with pencils, rhetoric with reading, you are affecting dramatic change. What would you say are the biggest accomplishments that have resulted from all of this?**

Education saves lives, empowers women and communities, and helps connect often exploited indigenous societies isolated by illiteracy, to the outside world.

For me, when I see the first girl in a village walking into a new school, it resembles when Neil Armstrong first stepped on the moon in 1969, and said ‘One small step for man, but one giant leap for mankind’.

To me, the first girl going to school is “one small step for that girl, but one giant leap for their community”.

It often takes several years of hard work and perseverance to convince conservative Islamic mullahs to initiate girls literacy and education in their communities.

The biggest accomplishment I see in communities where girls become literate is profound—their hygiene improves dramatically, they tell me they only plan to have 2-3 children vs. their mother having 8-10 children, the infant mortality of children with literate mothers drops as the mothers are eager to seek out health care, and even the “net-worth” for a dowry for an educated girl in a rural village doubles and triples (example: An illiterate girl is “worth” about 5 goats or \$300. An educated girl is “worth” at least \$600 - \$1000 in bride price).

### **What can others do to help in this cause?**

Be aware that education is a very effective, utilitarian way to bring profound change and stability in a society, and it only cost about \$1 monthly to get a rural child educated in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

In 2000, the United Nations proposed a fifteen year Millennium plan to get all the world’s 115 million (age 5-9) and 45 million (age 10-15) children literate. The external donated cost would only be an estimated \$6 to 8 billion annually (in addition to \$22 billion given by the countries themselves) for 15 years. Last year, the U.S. spent a total of \$94.2 billion in Iraq for the war on terror, which would have almost achieved the entire global literacy compliance in a year!

### **In 1996 you were kidnapped for eight days by armed Pakistani tribesman. In 2003 you survived a firefight with opium smugglers in Afghanistan. How did each of these happen and how did you escape?**

In July 1996, I was on a four month project trip to Pakistan, and wanted to see if we could expand our operations into Waziristan, which is the unruly area of Pakistan’s rugged, wild NWFP (Northwest Frontier Province), and few foreigners go. My mistake was that I was alone and not with any local person. After hiring a car for a 15 hour drive south of Peshawar city, I got off in a hamlet named Ladedh. The elders received me well with a dinner of lamb, and put me to sleep. At 2 AM, several armed, fierce looking gunmen burst into the room, blindfolded me and walked me down a hill to their waiting pickup. After an hour drive, I was led into another hamlet, and locked in an earthen room with only a tiny window and dim oil lamp.

For eight days, I was always guarded by two hashish smoking guards that observed my every move, but never harmed me. I was very frightened, as they did not explain or tell me what they were doing. On the third day, I decided I should befriend my captors, and asked them for a Holy Koran so they could teach me about Islam. Later, a local Mullah came to read the Koran to me in Arabic. After six days, I knew time was imperative without relief in sight, so I told them that my wife Tara was seven months pregnant and expecting a son—which is culturally very significant in their tribal society. That helped our relations tremendously, but at any moment I had nightmares that I would be walked outside, forced to kneel and be executed.

Then, suddenly, on the eighth night at about 2 AM, about a dozen gunmen burst into my room again, blindfolded me and took me down the trail to their pickup. After an hour of driving, they led me into a clearing where there were about 200 men in the chill of early dawn, chanting and firing their weapons to the sky, “Allah Akbhar” God is Great they chanted. They released me without explanation, and drove me back to Peshawar, and handed me a wad of pink, one hundred 100 rupee bills, and apologized for my inconvenience. Apparently, I was a bartering chip in a clan feud, and later I returned to the region – after they invited me back, and they now request dozens of schools for their children.

In late 2003, I was in northern Afghanistan, with no U.N. flights to get me out, and deteriorating weather. Since I was the key speaker at a big Colorado Mountain Club annual dinner, I decided to drive the 30 hour drive to Kabul in our old Toyota land cruiser at night. On a barren, gravel road between Taleqoun and Kondus, we suddenly were surrounded by a barrage of AK 47 gun-fire. Our driver, Abdullah, who has spent half his life as a mujahadeen fighter immediately drove into the roadside ditch and pulled me out of the car. Down the road came a dilapidated KAMAZ Soviet-era truck hauling putrid animal hides to a leather tanning factory. Abdullah shoved me in the back under the putrid hides where I remained for eight hours as it drove south. When I arrived in the USA (in time), the stench was horrible but I was still alive.

**You had a fatweh issued against you by a conservative Mullah in Pakistan. The fatweh was rescinded by the Shari at (High Islamic Court) on the grounds that your work was in line with Islamic practice.**

I've had two fatweh issued against me. The first was from a tiny hamlet mullah in Baldur valley named Sher Chaco to banish me forever from Pakistan. I sought out the advice of Saeed Abbas Risvi, the senior Islamic Shi-ite cleric in northern Pakistan, for advice. He wrote a letter to the (Shi-ite) Council of Ayatollahs in Qom, Iran for clarification. Several months later a reply came back, and I was summoned into the inner sanctum of the Imam Barra mosque in Skardu, Northern Pakistan. It was very imposing to walk in a room with eight important mullahs with their black head-covering on and I thought I would be forever banished from Pakistan for educating girls. Instead, they took a letter written in the ornate Persian script, and it read that they agreed that in Islam education is important for all children, and furthermore what I was doing was in the highest principles of Islam,

to help educate their children. The fatweh was rescinded and I was bombarded with requests for girls' school.

Saeed Agha Mubarik, a conservative mullah from Chutran village in Shegar Valley, of northern Pakistan, issued a fatweh to prohibit me, an infidel (non-believer) from helping get their children in school, and especially the girls. The community disagreed with him and over two years (2001-2003) took it to the Islamic high court (Shariat) for a ruling. Eventually, the fatweh was rescinded and today we have a school in Hemesil village, where there was none before. The real intent of Agha Mubarik was that he wanted the contract our organization signed with the villagers so he could pocket some money, and deny the village a school. For him, it was about money, not Islam.

### **What exactly is a fatweh?**

Most people think of a fatweh in relation to Salman Rushdie's death decree from Iran. However, a fatweh can be any prohibition or decree, such as banishing girls from school, banning TVs and such.

### **Why is it so important to educate girls, as well as boys, especially in conservative Islamic societies?**

Several global studies show that if you educate a girl, it does three important things in society:

- significantly decrease the population explosion over a generation or two
- reduce infant mortality dramatically in a decade or two
- significantly improve the basic quality of health and life itself.

From my own observations, and remembering a childhood proverb from Africa, there is a saying that "if you educate a boy—you educated an individual, because he often leaves the community to find work, and may never return or send back money, but if you educate a girl—you educate a community, because when the girl becomes a mother, she will remain in the community and instill that value in her community.

Also, one consideration, very under-reported in the western media and specifically related to the war on terror, is that in Islam, before a man leaves his home to go on any jihad—he must get permission from his mother. An educated woman will much more be unlikely to support her son in terror activities and deny or delay his departure.

Education in general is a powerful tool to provide alternatives to the illiterate, impoverished areas that are the recruiting grounds for terror. Literate Mullahs control vast swaths of rural, illiterate Pakistan and Afghanistan and their edicts remain supreme. As soon as a society is literate, the Mullah is disempowered and cannot disseminate false information. I often tell people, "The Mullah is not afraid of the bullet, but fears the pen".

**It sounds like you are constantly in some situation. Do you live in fear? If so, how and if not, how do you overcome it?**

Fear is always there, but courage and the motivation to help make the world a better place for all our children helps me overcome the fear and challenges. As a father of two young children, I am very aware of the difficulty and danger in my work.

**You've lived about half of your 50 years overseas, mostly in third world countries; does that alter how you feel as an American?**

We are blessed as Americans in so many ways, and certainly live in the greatest country on earth. But since 9/11, we've been building more walls than bridges, and that is very dangerous, as we live in a global community, where our very survival is dependent on cooperation, compassion and to overcome our fears of reaching out to those different than us.

**You advocate for peace, and say that the only way to win the war on terror is with books, not bombs, but yet you served in the U.S. Army after High School in 1975. Why?**

I am proud to be a U.S. military veteran, and would not discourage anyone from joining the military. However, the war on terror is ultimately a battle of "hearts and minds," and will only be won if we provide alternatives to the young children who are indoctrinated into extremist ideology at a young age. Hundreds of our loyal supporters are in the military or U.S. veterans, who send dozens of emails, that mostly reiterate that without education, nothing will change in Afghanistan.

Mahatma Ghandi once said, "you cannot shake hands with a clenched fist."

**Has the U.S. helped Pakistan much with relief efforts for the 7.6 magnitude earthquake on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005, that killed over 74,000 people. How could the U.S. help more with Pakistan's earthquake relief, and why?**

Although the U.S. deployed a dozen C47 Chinook helicopters only two days after the quake, and they have done a magnificent job to haul over 250 tons of relief supplies to remote mountain villages every day, the U.S. government has been dismal to meet our pledge of \$557 million to help Pakistan with relief. Only 40% of the funds have reached Pakistan.

Despite the heroic effort of hundreds of aid organizations, much of the relief effort is in chaos, and the Pakistan government and military are by far the most viable, effective force in the region. Our government needs to live up to their promise.

Over 9,000 schools were destroyed or shut down in the Pakistan earthquake, affecting over 500,000 students. Of the 74,000 fatalities, over 18,000 of those were students in school. As of 2008, only 450 of the 9,000 schools have been rebuilt.

**Who are two of your heroes (male and female)?**

Mother Theresa—I once was alone with her as she lay in her Daughter’s of Charity room before her en-tombment (in Calcutta). It was a life inspiring moment, as I reached out to touch her frail, tiny hand with my giant hand, and to realize that such a small woman had changed the world with compassion. That moment is forever is imprinted in me. It’s all in **THREE CUPS OF TEA**.

Prof. Smartya Sen, from Harvard and Cambridge, 1998 Economics Nobel Prize Winner, who is a leading advocate for girls education, and pioneered a new way to assess poverty indicators, along with the late Pakistani economist Dr. Meboub Haq, who redefined the \$1 / day poverty indices. Both say that in order to really change the world, we must educate girls as well as boys.

### **Do you know where Osama bin Laden is, or if he is alive?**

If I knew where Osama was, we could reap a big reward and build 2,000 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the war on terror would be obsolete.

From my extensive conversations with many people, elders, military, and government authorities in Pakistan and Afghanistan all believe that Osama is dead. Although there have been tapes, several leading world experts on audiology and the world’s definitive voice recognition company, the Swiss-Lausanne-based Dalle Molle Institute for Perceptual Artificial Intelligence (IDIAP), have denied that tapes are attributed to bin Laden. Voice recognition and patterns are not as definitive as a fingerprint, and one must do extensive analysis on the messages, word patterns, references to the Koran etc.

### **What exactly does “THREE CUPS OF TEA” mean?**

Although symbolic, to do business in Pakistan or Afghanistan, it takes three cups of tea first. In their culture, the first cup you are a stranger, and by the second tea gathering you become a friend, and with the third cup you become family, and they will protect you with their life and are ready to do business, but the process takes several years. Here, in America we have two minute football drills, thirty minute power lunches, and “shock and awe,” but that does not work in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

### **What do you hope people gain from reading THREE CUPS OF TEA?**

That ultimately to achieve global peace and defeat terror we must do it with education and books, not edicts and bombs. I also hope it inspires our younger generation to know that anyone can make a difference and be pro-active. Martin Luther said that even if the world would end today, we will should still plant seeds and trees for tomorrow. Even in America, we have extreme poverty, but I think the greatest poverty we face in our country is a poverty of compassion and that we live more in fear, than in hope. If you fight terrorism, it is based in fear, but if you promote peace, it is based in hope. Ignorance is the real enemy, wheather it is in Afghanistan, Africa or America, and it is ignorance that breeds hatred.

We can overcome that ignorance with compassion, courage and encourage all children (and adults) with to promote peace, and have hope through education.

**How can people find out more about your work?**

[www.threeCupsoftea.com](http://www.threeCupsoftea.com) – “Three cups of Tea” book

[www.ikat.org](http://www.ikat.org) Central Asia Institute - nonprofit

[www.penniesforpeace.org](http://www.penniesforpeace.org) Pennies For Peace – children’s program

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