ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THREE CUPS OF TEA

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Since 1993, after a failed attempt at climbing K2 in Pakistan's Karakoram region, Greg Mortenson has devoted his life to people living in poverty in Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan. Losing his way coming down from K2, Mortenson stumbled into Korphe, a small village at the foot the Biafo Glacier, 39 miles long and one mile at its deepest. After seeing the children sitting in the cold and wind and scratching out their lessons with sticks, Mortenson vowed that he would build them a school.

Over the past fifteen years, Mortenson's Central Asia Institute has built 64 schools and has paid the salaries of 562 teachers, who have taught over 25,000 pupils, more than half of them girls. In addition to schools, Mortenson has also built water systems, medical clinics, and vocational facilities that focus on entrepreneurial skills for village women.

Initially, raising funds for the school in Korphe was slow going, even though Mortensen estimated it would cost only $12,000. Tom Brokow sent him $100, and the children at a Wisconsin school filled two trash cans with 62,345 pennies for Mortenson's school. Since then, Mortenson's Pennies for Peace has raised over $160,000 for his programs.

Education of Girls Imperative

At first Mortenson encountered resistance from village leaders and clerics about educating girls. Twice local mullahs issued fatwas against him, charging that his schools would corrupt the girls and undermine the children's Muslim faith. Both fatwas were lifted by the highest religious Shia authorities in Iran, after his supporters presented evidence about the true nature of his work. The Sunni majority government in Islamabad was particularly neglectful of their Shia brothers and sisters in the mountains.

When a village asks for a school, Mortenson insists on two conditions: (1) craftsmen and laborers must be local; and (2) girls must be enrolled. At least once he has had to waive the second condition. After a Taliban attack on one of Mortenson's schools in Lalander, Afghanistan, the 18 girls there had to be removed and sent to Kabul for their education. The fifteen Taliban fighters had been paid $200 each to attack the Lalander school, which demonstrates that money is sometimes just as much motivation as religion for terrorist acts.

Mortensen has learned that when you educate a boy you benefit primarily an individual, but when you educate a girl you help an entire community. The greatest fear among village women is that their babies will die (mainly of diarrhea), so Mortenson always combines school building with clean water projects and medical clinics. As Mortenson states: "When women are literate and educated, there is about a 50 percent reduction in infant mortality." Furthermore, young men who go on jihad must get permission from their mothers, and Mortenson is convinced that "an educated woman is not likely to" grant that permission. There is a long road ahead, because 70 percent of Pakistani women are illiterate.

Because of thirty years of almost constant war, there are an estimated 1 million widows in Afghanistan. Reporter Karin Ronnow writes about an Afghan widow named Rubina, who once lived in a cave with her seven children, all of them sick and malnourished. When
Mortenson came to see her, she fulfilled her duty to serve him tea even though she had to make it from grass. Mortenson had to shame the local Muslim men to do their religious duty to care for a widow. He also persuaded local masons to build her a house, and now truck drivers who carry materials for Mortenson's schools in the area drop off supplies for her.

**Getting the Clerics on Your Side**

Mortenson's strongest ally has been Syed Abbas, the Supreme Leader of the Shia Muslims of Northern Pakistan. At the inauguration of the new school in Kuardu on September 14, 2001, Abbas spoke about the attack on the Twin Towers: "We share in the sorrow as people weep and suffer in America today. Those who have committed . . . this evil act . . . do not do so in the name of Islam. For this tragedy, I humbly ask Mr. George [McGown] and Dr. Greg Sahib for their forgiveness." Mortenson was called "Doctor" because he was a nurse stateside during the Himalayan winters, and he saved all his wages doing ER work in the Bay Area for his projects.

Because of the invasion of Iraq, many Muslims across the world are alienated from us, but because of Mortenson's work in Pakistani and Afghani villages, these Muslims love us. There are certainly lessons to be learned for this, as the Bush Administration continues to fight the War on Terror with bombs and threats of more bombing.

**Three Cups of Tea**

Mortenson had to learn his own lessons, starting with his own "shock and awe" campaign to get the school in Korphe done "on time." The village leader Haji Ali finally had to take his tools and lock them in a box. Mortenson then learned the importance of *Three Cups of Tea*, the title of his best-selling book about his work in South Central Asia. After locking his tools away, Haji Ali said to Mortenson: "Sit down. And shut your mouth. You're making us all crazy."

After the salted yak butter tea had been served, Haji Ali continued: "If you want to thrive in Baltistan, you must respect our ways. The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die. Doctor Greg, you must make time to share three cups of tea."

**Learning Muslim Ways**

Mortenson had already learned some fundamental lessons. He dressed in the shalwar, the native pajama-like outfit. He also learned the languages: Balti, Farsi, Pashto, and Urdu, Pakistan's national language. He also insisted on living among the people and didn't mind their yak dung fires. Furthermore, he insisted on learning how to pray like a Muslim, having been instructed by his Sunni friends in Rawalpindi. He did not realize that the Shias in the mountains prayed differently, but his new village friends quickly forgave him for his faux pas.

His knowledge of Muslim ways most likely saved his life while imprisoned by radical Islamists in Warizistan, a tribal area near the Afghan border where Osama bin Laden is probably hiding out. On his second day of captivity, he asked for a Qur'an and performed the ritual washing before prayer, which very much impressed his guard. Finally convinced that he was not a CIA agent and was sincere about his work with Pakistani children, his captors was released.
him after nine days. He was overwhelmed when one of the men gave him a wad of hundred rupee notes for his schools.

Mortenson's climbing friends are amazed at his accomplishments. They are no doubt ashamed that their own ideas of helping porters, each carrying up to 150 pounds of their gear, rarely came to fruition. There is also the additional embarrassment that it was the Nepali Sherpas that other climbers always helped. Their exotic Buddhism was much exciting and attractive than the austere Shia faith of the Balti tribesmen.

**Tea with the Taliban**

In the fall of 2001, Pakistan was the only country that recognized the Taliban, and their diplomats came to the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad every night to drink tea, the only item they could afford on their budget. No one, not even Western reporters, dared approach them. One night Mortenson, who refused to stay at swanky hotels but met his associates there, joined the Taliban for tea.

Conversing in Pashto, the language of the Pashtuns who live on both sides of the border, Mortenson learned that the Taliban ambassador Mullah Zaeef was in favor of releasing Osama bin Laden to the Americans. He also learned that the top Taliban leader Mullah Omar wanted to have a meeting with George Bush, and he had tried to contact the White House twice by satellite phone. The Taliban claim that Bush declined. Just think, however, what three cups of tea with the Taliban might have accomplished.

**Ignorance is the Only Enemy**

Speaking to the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, Mortenson declared that "in Pakistan and America we have one enemy, that enemy is ignorance. To defeat ignorance, we must have education, especially for girls." There is also another type of ignorance that is just as important to eliminate. This is the lack of knowledge about Islam in Europe and America.

- Most people don't know that 700,000 Muslims world-wide have signed a petition denouncing the radical Islamist agenda.
- In Peshawar, Pakistan, right on the border with Afghanistan, Mutfi Zainul Aabideen has announced a fatwa declaring that the Taliban are "out of Islam."
- In 2007, insisting that the very survival of the world depended upon it, 138 Muslim clerics and scholars published a call for reconciliation among the religions of Abraham. In March 2008 five Muslim leaders met with five Vatican officials to plan an interfaith summit later in the year.
- Over 650 million people, including 150 million Indian Muslims, live in moderate Muslim nations, including Morocco, Turkey, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Yes, education is the key, including, sadly enough, some of the most educated people in the world.
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