

Stones into Schools

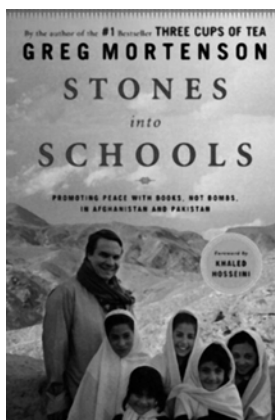
Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan

BY GREG MORTENSON

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Reviewed by Louise Nayer



Stones into Schools chronicles Greg Mortenson's journey into the most remote regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan to promote peace by building schools. This book, unlike *Three Cups of Tea*, is written in first person point of view which allows readers to fully enter Mortenson's thoughts as he grapples with his role not only as he builds schools, focusing on girls' education, but as he attracts rock-star crowds as the spokesperson for the Central Asia Institute (CAI). In the beginning of the book, horsemen from the Kirghiz region in Afghanistan ride miles through harsh terrain to extract a promise from Greg to build a school in the Wakhan Corridor, a once-bustling place that is now one of the poorest and remote places on earth. What he has done, and is doing—fighting terror by building schools—is not only an urgent matter for the children whose lives will be transformed as they learn to read and write, but his mission is urgent for a region torn apart by fighting and for a world that longs for peace.

The spiritual guide for *Three Cups of Tea* was Haji Ali, who believed that even though he never learned to read or write, "hope resides in the future." *Stones into Schools* begins with a recap of some of Mortenson's previous work and a definition of his "last place first" philosophy that sets the CAI apart from many other organizations. Carrying a sticker on his briefcase that says "The Last Best Place," Mortenson believes "the people who are most neglected and least valued by the larger world—often represent the best of who we are and the finest standard of what we are meant to become." This philosophy leads Mortenson and the "dirty dozen," a group of people he has hired to work for him, to succeed in building schools in "Taliban Country." The employees include a Balti poet, two former members of the Taliban, and an ex-goatherd. Like his father before him, Mortenson believes that the people of a region know what is best for their own people.

Mortenson also forms an unlikely alliance with the military. Admiral Mike Mullen, a supporter of the CAI and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said we "can't kill our way to victory." Instead of spending \$845,000 on a Tomahawk missile, the money could seed Afghanistan and Pakistan with non-extremist schools.



Images of Afghan children from the book. Photos by Brian Lawrenson.
Image source: http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0670021156/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_1?ie=UTF8&index=1.

Mortenson and all who work for the Central Asia Institute have built bridges between cultures, turned stones into schools, and changed the lives of the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

One of the true heroes of the book is Safraz, a broken man who later finds his purpose working with unrelenting energy for the CAI. He helped get seismically sound schools built in the 2005 earthquake-devastated areas of Pakistan. In one school, an open space where seven girls had been buried by the earthquake becomes part of the school's design. They are buried so that all their heads rest toward the blackboard.

Navigating through rough terrain, Greg becomes physically and mentally exhausted from all the speaking engagements in multiple cities and towns across America, creating a heightened sense of drama. At the end of the book, now almost a decade later—Abdul Rashid Khan, the leader of Kirghiz in the Wakhan Corridor who sent his horsemen to Greg at the beginning of the book, is dying without the school being built. Khan issues an edict to his people—he does not want them to visit a dying man but to mobilize to build this school before winter sets in. Mortenson then hears of the "longest Yak train in living memory" carrying supplies to the Wakhan Corridor.

Mortenson and all who work for the CAI have built bridges between cultures, turned stones into schools, and changed the lives of the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This book would be excellent for both high school and college students who could learn about the complicated history and geography of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Students can also study the effect of a non-extremist education on a community and get involved with CAI through their many programs such as Pennies for Peace. ■

LOUISE NAYER, Professor of English and Creative Writing at City College of San Francisco, believes in teaching students about other cultures to help them become compassionate citizens of the world. She has recently published *Burned: A Memoir* (Atlas and Co., 2010). You may visit her Web site at <http://www.louisenayer.com/>.