

THREE CUPS OF TEA

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

BY GREG MORTENSON
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Reviewed by Louise Nayer



More than anything, *Three Cups of Tea* is about promises kept. In a world where, for many, empty words, corruption, and the pursuit of money—rather than humanitarian values—have become the norm, this book is a journey of hope, not simply imagined but realized. It is the personal journey of a rock climber, Greg Mortenson, who wanted desperately to reach the summit of K2 in Pakistan's Karakoram mountain range to memorialize his sister, Christa, by leaving her necklace at 28,267 feet. Christa died young and was “. . . the nicest of all of us. She

faced her limitations with grace.” Though he did not make it to the top, her kind spirit and life of struggle guided him. When he was found, near death, and brought to the village of Korphe, he witnessed the extreme poverty and grave medical problems of the villagers. These villagers, who had next to nothing, gave him endless attention, food, and drink.

Years passed, and he kept his promise to build a school—what the village needed the most. Haji Ali, the *nurmadhar* (village chief) of Korphe village, infuses the book with wisdom as he and Mortenson, along with many others, work together to build the first school. In time, “Dr. Greg” as he was called, was asked to share the third cup of tea in Baltisan, in Pakistan's northern areas. In the words of Haji Ali, “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.”


Mortenson's early life is also explored, and the book seamlessly moves back and forth between his personal story and the drama of traveling in Pakistan to remote villages, risking his life, and depending on the extreme generosity of those who helped him. Greg's unusual childhood, where he lived partly in Tanzania and partly in the midwest US, gives insight into myriad cultures. His parents were dedicated to helping others, and his father, Dempsey, “threw every molecule of himself into the great achievement of his life—raising money for and founding Tanzania's first teaching hospital . . .” His father respected the people with whom he worked, and was proud to leave the medical




Greg Mortenson and students from Sitara ('star') school, Sarhad village, Wakhan corridor, North-east Afghanistan 2005. Image source: <http://www.gregmortenson.com/Photo%20Pages/SitaraSchool.html>.

center to be run by Tanzanians. “It's your country. It's your hospital,” he said.

As well as exploring Mortenson's life and his relationship with men and women in the villages, the book is an adventure story. From the beginning of the journey, when he sends 580 letters out to the universe, hoping that one person will respond by giving money to build a school in Korphe, the reader is waiting and hoping with Greg. He lives in his car. He has a personal relationship that goes sour. He finally gets money from Jean Hoerni, an accomplished scientist, who died happily knowing he had given money to build a school for children who previously had no hope of receiving an education.



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Each chapter of the book takes the reader closer to the dream fulfilled, and a universal sigh of relief is felt when the first school is built. The reader comes to understand the incredible obstacles, both personal and political, that stood in the way—but it doesn't end there. There is always a new beginning because so many more children are in need. Mortenson's personal journey is also fulfilled when he meets his wife, Tara, the daughter of a famous climber. She understands his vision and sacrifices so he can continue his work. As readers we rejoice when they meet and create a family.

Perhaps the most poignant aspect of the book is how women's lives have been changed by Greg's work. Aslam, a village leader, recognizes that his daughter, Shakeela, "is the most clever among them." She had no hope, though, of ever getting an education until Greg passed through the village. So many climbers passed through the mountains with their expensive gear and dreams of reaching the summit of K2, but it was Greg who finally changed their lives. Shakeela becomes "Hush's Valley first educated woman." In a photo included in the book, she is serious and full of pride and will use her education to help her village. Jahan, one of Korphe's first female graduates, asked Mortenson for money to complete her education to become a doctor. When it is time for the tuition payment, she boldly outlines exactly what she needs. For a woman from her village to so clearly pursue her goals demonstrates the far-reaching effects of the education that has been provided. She will make a huge difference in her community, and the circle of light will widen.

Three Cups of Tea can be successfully used in both high school and college English and history classes. Character, plot, setting, and theme can be explored and discussed within the context of how to tell a true story and make it compelling. For history and sociology classes, the Pakistan culture, wars, the place of women in society, and the need to understand and respect other cultures can be discussed and analyzed, as the students see how one person can work hard to make a difference and succeed, even after experiencing failure.

Through his efforts, Greg Mortenson, trained as a nurse, has worked with many others to build over fifty schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He has gained worldwide support for his dedication to educating those in great need who may otherwise have joined extremist groups. Women's lives, especially, have been changed. *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School at a Time* is a personal journey and an adventure story, both harrowing and inspiring. The reader is brought into the fold, asked not only to read the book, but also to help make a difference in a wounded world. "The Enemy is Ignorance." ■

LOUISE NAYER is a Professor of English at City College of San Francisco. She has written two books of poetry, co-authored a non-fiction book *How to Bury a Goldfish*, and is currently working on a memoir. For the past thirty years she has taught creative writing, literature, and English composition. Louise is dedicated to helping her students become compassionate learners and critical thinkers who will work toward a better world for all.