

Stones into Schools

Greg Mortenson
ISBN: 978-0-14-311823-7

Read: 2011 January 1 - 25

Reviewed: 2011 June 25

Greg Mortenson was like a lot of modestly well-to-do folks in the yuppie generation. He was off climbing difficult mountains in exotic parts of the world just for the difficulty and achievement of it. In an attempt on K2 and following a dramatic rescue of a fellow climber he got lost and ultimately wandered into a rural mountain village where he was cared for until he was able to continue. In the process he became so enamored with the culture and one particular need of the culture that he has devoted his life to helping meet that need for that culture ever since. He saw the children being instructed out of doors and promised to come back and build them a school building.

There is a prior book, *Three Cups of Tea*, that refers to the custom in that culture that one must have three cups of tea with another before knowing them well enough to discuss or do business.

The front of the book contains several maps of various regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan followed by a list of the major players in the narrative. I referred to these often.

Afghanistan is a dangerous place for westerners like Mortenson but he entrusts himself to those who know him closely and agree with his vision. His vision, the problem he is working on for the neglected, tribal folks in the hinterlands, the high mountain passes, is the education of their youth, particularly the girls.

The idea is that an educated girl is an asset, a stabilizing force, in the community. Even concepts as basic as hygiene are largely unknown to the people, much less the women and children of these communities. Their men spend their days fighting enemies (like the Americans, or the Taliban, or "influences") or tending livestock. The women are their property and exist for the purpose of tending to their needs and for bearing and raising their children. One trained nurse or midwife among these women could make an enormous difference in the mortality rate in the community. Mortenson is quoted as saying, "You can drop bombs, hand out condoms, build roads or put in electricity, but unless the girls are educated, a society won't change." But it requires the permission of the owners, the men of the community, to do anything with the women. These men sit in council far into the night drinking tea and smoking. Mortenson sits with them and, in a culturally appropriate way, lobbies them to allow him to build a school for their children, particularly the girls, so that they can get the education they need to go to the city and get more education so they can come back and serve their communities in this and countless other ways. Sometimes the community leaders come to him for his help. He is in demand out in

the wilderness where most of the government programs have no concern due to the relatively small number of people.

Often the men, or the councils, do not grant permission for education of their girls or women. It is not a woman's place to know anything, some think, or they cannot do without one or more of them for any extended period of education. For those who are permitted and who have the aptitude for it, Mortenson's organization takes care of putting them through the system. He has been doing this long enough that there are a few women now working to make Afghanistan a better place for everyone.

Greg works with a group of local men, go-getters and achievers, who make things happen locally and know the turf: where it is safe to drive at night, what rumbles are going on in what communities that should be avoided, where the passes have snowed in for the winter, where to get building materials, how to barter for transportation, and so on. He flies back and forth to the United States where he tours raising money for the cause. The goal in this book was a "School on the Roof of the World", a place so remote that progress on the school was unknown and the condition of an ailing elder in the community was unknown when the book went to press.

These fund raising efforts back in the west are grueling and taxing beyond the limits of human capacity. The books are part of the fund raising of course. Greg has burned out in the process, simply run out of steam. He would rather be in the Khyber Pass making things happen. His family is understanding and supportive, but it is not unusual for him to be in the east for extended operations for long periods, over holidays and birthdays and so on. In that sense he is the classic workaholic.

This book was discussed in the Pasadena Covenant Men's Book Club in January 2011. In the few months since then, press reports have come out detailing mis-handling of funds at his Central Asia Institute, formally a "Non Governmental Organization" working for humanitarian causes in other countries. I have not studied or followed these reports at all, but the snippets I've heard lead me to believe it's just sloppy business in a big, growing, and personality centered organization, the same sort of thing that happens to televangelists. All these people need to read and *E-Myth* ./EMyth.pdf. Just because a person is good at or essential to something that your organization does, doesn't mean he is good at meeting all of its crucial needs, such as acceptable accounting practices. This is the classic case of a passionate and charismatic leader who is utterly, personally disorganized, and it is unfortunate that the organization wasn't built out to address this by some empathetic but hard-nosed business manager. The problems, now into the lawsuit and investigative journalism stage, are ongoing at this time.

Also, the critics have challenged the factual accuracy of some of the stories in his books. Many of the schools he built are said not to be in use. The disaster around K2 is unconfirmable. It seems that there is no inspirational story or character that doesn't have feet of clay these days. Do we blame the muckrakers, the principals, or ... ourselves ... for this mess?

After having advised and cooperated with major military leaders in the region, and being recognized at the highest and lowest levels in both countries, and being nominated for a Nobel Prize, it is sad that this man and his organization are in the situation they are in today. If we knew how to use resources such as those available to *60 Minutes* to help people do right rather than making examples of them by the relatively easy expedient of destruction, wouldn't we be better off? Or maybe we prefer to promote peace through bombs not books. Huh?