



Stones into Schools

Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea* and the recently released *Stones into Schools*, has been successful in showing the world a great truth – that service must be based on love and gratitude, and that love involves suffering and sacrifice, great patience and listening to the people one wants to serve. Action on behalf of those who have the least is not just a kindness but a principle of action that radiates throughout society. Greg Mortenson's actions on behalf of the least and the lowest in the remotest part of Afghanistan and Pakistan, places forgotten even by their own countries, have stimulated the imagination and admiration of the world. They have shown, as Thoreau pointed out, that acting from universal principles of right is at the core of true change in the world.

The spirit of courageous commitment shines forth in *Stones into Schools* as Greg Mortenson shares his account of the journey to bring schools to the farthest reaches of Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor, part of the old Silk Road. Mortenson's first book, *Three Cups of Tea*, tells the story of Greg's trek to K2 in honor of his sister, Christa, who died of epilepsy. His ascent stopped short of the peak, and on his way down, he became lost on the Boltoro Glacier in Pakistan. He wandered, exhausted and dehydrated, into Korphe, and was taken in by Haji Ali, the village chief who became his mentor. As he regained his health, he found eighty-two children sitting outside, writing in the dirt with sticks, without a teacher. One of the girls, Chocho, asked Greg to promise that he would return to her village to build a school. He gave his word of honor, and the book recounts his undaunted efforts to raise funds, overcome innumerable obstacles and bring materials to Korphe so the children could have a school. This was the beginning of a journey that has led to the creation of 131 schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, educating over 58,000 students.

In general, the Taliban prohibit girls from obtaining an education, so special emphasis has been placed on creating schools with large populations of female students. Literacy is a fundamental human right that when denied, causes cascading effects in terms of maternal and infant mortality, and socioeconomic

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growth, as shown by the World Bank studies. Women who are educated are more likely to ensure their children are educated.

Greg's heartfelt approach to bringing opportunities for education to the people in Afghanistan is remarkable psychologically and politically. Honoring the dignity of each person, Greg forges relationships with village elders, and respects the values of the community. He says that he learned early on that he had to throw away his agenda. It takes time to have three cups of tea. He recognizes that he needs to build relationships that will sustain the environment in which children can have a chance to learn. Greg writes, "When you take the time to actually listen, with humility, to what people have to say, it's amazing what you can learn. Especially if the people who are doing the talking also happen to be children."

The people donate the land for their school and do the construction, while the Central Asian Institute (CAI) which Greg directs, provides the funding for the materials and pays the salary of the teachers and supplies. His grassroots efforts put the initiative in the hands of the villagers, and they identify with the school as their own.

Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, well describes Greg's philosophy in the Foreword, "The conflict in Afghanistan will ultimately not be won with guns and airstrikes, but with books, notebooks, pencils, tools of socioeconomic wellbeing." The changing face of the military is represented by Col. Kolendra who believes in the absolute importance of non-extremist education to bring stability to Afghanistan. Greg has heard from many veterans of the Afghanistan war that moderate education is the best way to combat Islamic extremism.

Contrasting sharply with the immense beauty of the pristine peaks of the Neelum Valley is the darkness of attitudes toward women. One young girl, Siddre, who was finishing the twelfth grade, wanted to become a doctor and return to Bhedi to help her community. Her father appealed to CAI for a scholarship. When the CAI staff visited her home, it became clear that all the females in the family were totally enthusiastic about Siddre going to college, while her brother-in-law strongly objected. He felt that the money should not be given to a girl, and that the true value of the scholarship could only be realized if he received the money. Siddre's father allowed the brother-in-law's objections to stop her from getting the scholarship.

Mountain climbing teaches courage, stamina, respect for nature, and vision; climbers endure physical and emotional hardship. Greg brings these qualities to his work to serve Afghans, as well as humility and a willingness to learn from others. He exemplifies an integrity that values as supremely important keeping his word to a young girl. His sacrificial efforts, along with those of his band of

comrades, have brought a light to shine in the lives of many young girls in Afghanistan that surely will be passed on to many others in the future.

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