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OP-ED COLUMNIST

'Three Cups of Tea,' Spilled

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Published: April 20, 2011

One of the people I've enormously admired in recent years is Greg Mortenson. He's a former mountain climber who, after a failed effort to climb the world's second-highest mountain, K2, began building schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan.



Damon Winter/The New York Times
Nicholas D. Kristof

On the Ground

Nicholas Kristof addresses reader feedback and posts short takes from his travels.

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Nicholas D. Kristof/The New York Times
Girls studying last year in a school in Afghanistan built and operated by Greg Mortenson.

Readers' Comments

Readers shared their thoughts on this article.

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In person, Greg is modest, passionate and utterly disorganized. Once he showed up half-an-hour late for a speech, clumping along with just one shoe — and then kept his audience spellbound with his tale of building peace through schools.

Greg has spent chunks of time traipsing through Afghanistan and Pakistan, constructing schools in impossible places, and he works himself half to death. Instead of driving around in a white S.U.V. with a security detail, he wears local clothes and takes battered local cars to blend in. He justly berates himself for spending too much time on the road and not enough with his wife, Tara Bishop, and their children, Amira and Khyber.

I've counted Greg as a friend, had his family over at my house for lunch and extolled him in my column. He gave a blurb for my most recent book, "Half the Sky," and I read his book "Three Cups of Tea" to my daughter. It's indisputable that Greg has educated many thousands of children, and he has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

And now his life's work is tottering after a "60 Minutes" exposé and an online booklet by Jon Krakauer, a onetime supporter. Greg is accused of many offenses: misstating how he got started building schools; lying about a dramatic kidnapping; exaggerating how many schools he has built and operates; and using his charity, the [Central Asia Institute](#), "as his personal A.T.M." The attorney general of Montana, where his charity is based, has opened an inquiry into the allegations.

I don't know what to make of these accusations. Part of me wishes that all this journalistic energy had been directed instead to ferret out abuses by politicians who allocate government resources to campaign donors rather than to the neediest among us, but that's not a real answer. The critics have raised serious

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Three Cups of Tea Co-Author David Oliver Relin Committed Suicide

By Adam Martin



When David Oliver Relin, the journalist best known for co-authoring the famous but controversial *Three Cups of Tea* along with Greg Mortenson, died on November 15, details about his passing were scarce. But on Sunday the *New York Times* reported that Relin had taken his own life, confirming with his family that the Oregon-based writer had "suffered from depression." The cause of death still hasn't been reported but a police statement is due out later this week. Relin never spoke publicly about the

controversy surrounding the memoir about Mortenson, the accuracy of which *60 Minutes* questioned in a report that charged portions of the book had been fabricated, along with Mortenson's reports of his own charity work. Per the *Times*: "Elizabeth Kaplan, the agent for the book, acknowledged that the relationship between the two men was difficult from the start. Mr. Mortenson, who was traveling to remote areas, could be hard to track down, and Mr. Relin spoke publicly about how Mr. Mortenson should not have been named a co-author." A federal lawsuit against Mortenson and Relin stemming from that *60 Minutes* report was thrown out earlier this year, but is currently under appeal, *Outside* magazine reports. Relin's second book, *Second Suns: Two Doctors' Amazing Quest to Restore Sight and Save Lives*, is due to be published in February.

David Oliver Relin, Adventurous Journalist, Dies at 49 [NY Times]

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INTRODUCTION

Three Cups of Tea is the true story of one of the most extraordinary humanitarian missions of our time. In 1993, a young American mountain climber named Greg Mortenson stumbles into a tiny village high in Pakistan's beautiful and desperately poor Karakoram Himalaya region. Sick, exhausted, and depressed after a failing to scale the summit of K2, Mortenson regains his strength and his will to live thanks to the generosity of the people of the village of Korphe. Before he leaves, Mortenson makes a vow that will profoundly change both the villagers' lives and his own—he will return and build them a school.

The book traces how Mortenson kept this promise (and many more) in the high country of Pakistan and Afghanistan, despite considerable odds. The region is remote and dangerous, a notorious breeding ground for Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists. In the course of his work, Mortenson was kidnapped and threatened with death. He endured local rivalries, deep misunderstandings, jealousy, and corruption, not to mention treacherous roads and epic weather. But he believed passionately that balanced, non-extremist education, for boys and girls alike, is the most effective way to combat the violent intolerance that breeds terrorism. To date, Mortenson's Central Asia Institute has constructed fifty-five schools, and his work continues.

Mortenson initially approached Karakoram as a climber and he never lost the mountaineer's appreciation for the region's austere beauty and incredible physical challenges. His coauthor David Oliver Relin deftly evokes high-altitude landscapes haunted by glaciers, snow leopards, and the deaths of scores of climbers. As Mortenson transformed himself from down-and-out climbing bum to the director of a humanitarian enterprise, he came to appreciate more and more deeply the struggles that people of the region endure every day—struggles that have intensified with the recent explosion of war and sectarian violence.

In the course of this narrative, readers come to know Mortenson as a friend, a husband and father, a traveling companion, a son and brother, and also as a flawed human being. Mortenson made enemies along the way and frustrated his friends and family. Relin does not shy away from depicting the man's exasperating qualities—his restlessness, disorganization, sleeplessness, and utter disregard for punctuality. But Mortenson never asks others to make sacrifices that he has not already made himself time and time again.

The war-torn mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan appear in the news as the breeding grounds of terrorist training camps, Al Qaeda hide-outs, and fierce religious extremism. In *Three Cups of Tea*, Mortenson and Relin take readers behind the headlines to reveal the true heart and soul of this explosive region and to show how one man's promise might be enough to change the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Greg Mortenson is the director of the Central Asia Institute. A resident of Montana, he spends several months of the year in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

David Oliver Relin is a contributing editor for *Parade* magazine and *Skiing* magazine. He has won more

than forty national awards for his work as a writer and editor.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There is a telling passage about Mortenson's change of direction at the start of the book: "One evening, he went to bed by a yak dung fire a mountaineer who'd lost his way, and one morning, by the time he'd shared a pot of butter tea with his hosts and laced up his boots, he'd become a humanitarian who'd found a meaningful path to follow for the rest of his life." What made Mortenson particularly ripe for such a transformation? Has anything similar happened in your own life?
2. Relin gives a "warts and all" portrait of Mortenson, showing him as a hero but also as a flawed human being with some exasperating traits. Talk about how Relin chose to write about Mortenson's character—his choice of details, his perspective, the way he constructs scenes. Is Mortenson someone you'd like to get to know, work with, or have as a neighbor or friend?
3. At the heart of the book is a powerful but simple political message: we each as individuals have the power to change the world, one cup of tea at a time. Yet the book powerfully dramatizes the obstacles in the way of this philosophy: bloody wars waged by huge armies, prejudice, religious extremism, cultural barriers. What do you think of the "one cup of tea at a time" philosophy? Do you think Mortenson's vision can work for lasting and meaningful change?
4. Have you ever known anyone like Mortenson? Have you ever had the experience of making a difference yourself through acts of generosity, aid, or leadership?
5. The Balti people are fierce yet extremely hospitable, kind yet rigid, determined to better themselves yet stuck in the past. Discuss your reactions to them and the other groups that Mortenson tries to help.
6. After Haji Ali's family saves Greg's life, he reflects that he could never "imagine discharging the debt he felt to his hosts in Korphe." Discuss this sense of indebtedness as key to Mortenson's character. Why was Mortenson compelled to return to the region again and again? In your opinion, does he repay his debt by the end of the book?
7. References to paradise run throughout the book—Mortenson's childhood home in Tanzania, the mountain scenery, even Berkeley, California, are all referred to as "paradise." Discuss the concept of paradise, lost and regained, and how it influences Mortenson's mission.
8. Mortenson's transition from climbing bum to humanitarian hero seems very abrupt. However, looking back, it's clear that his sense of mission is rooted in his childhood, the values of his parents, and his relationship with his sister Christa. Discuss the various facets of Mortenson's character—the freewheeling mountain climber, the ER nurse, the devoted son and brother, and the leader of a humanitarian cause. Do you view him as continuing the work his father began?
9. "I expected something like this from an ignorant village mullah, but to get those kinds of letters from my fellow Americans made me wonder whether I should just give up," Mortenson remarked after he started getting hate mail in the wake of September 11. What was your reaction to the letters Mortenson received?
10. Mortenson hits many bumps in the road—he's broke, his girlfriend dumps him, he is forced to build a bridge before he can build the school, his health suffers, and he drives his family crazy. Discuss his repeated brushes with failure and how they influenced your opinion of Mortenson and his efforts.
11. The authors write that "the Balti held the key to a kind of uncomplicated happiness that was disappearing in the developing world." This peaceful simplicity of life seems to be part of what attracts Mortenson to the villagers. Discuss the pros and cons of bringing "civilization" to the mountain community.
12. Much of the book is a meditation on what it means to be a foreigner assimilating with another culture. Discuss your own experiences with foreign cultures—things that you have learned, mistakes you have made, misunderstandings you have endured.

13. Did the book change your views toward Islam or Muslims? Consider the cleric Syed Abbas, and also the cleric who called a fatwa on Mortenson. Syed Abbas implores Americans to "look into our hearts and see that the great majority of us are not terrorists, but good and simple people." Discuss this statement. Has the book inspired you to learn more about the region?

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Greg Mortenson

1957-

Birth: 1957

Nationality: American

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"Sidelights"

In 1993, Greg Mortenson went to Pakistan to climb K2, the second-highest mountain in the world. He had no idea when he departed just how far the journey would take him. Mortenson failed to reach the summit, and then he was separated from his group and found himself lost during the descent. He wound up in a remote village in Pakistan begging for aid and shelter. The villagers took him in and cared for him until he was healthy enough to continue, and he promised to repay them by building a school for the village's children.

Mortenson returned to the United States, sold everything he owned, which netted him a mere two thousand dollars, and solicited donations until he had enough money to build that first school. After difficult negotiations with local officials and threats from local Muslim clerics, who were opposed to Mortenson's plan to educate girls as well as boys, Mortenson finally succeeded in opening the school. He then founded the Central Asia Institute, which built dozens more. By 2006 the institute had sponsored fifty-five schools, which served 24,000 children in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia.

This story is told in *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations--One School at a Time*, which Mortenson wrote with journalist David Oliver Relin. The book presents "a fresh perspective on the cultures and development efforts of Central Asia," Vanessa Bush noted in *Booklist*, as well as an "incredible story of a humanitarian endeavor." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic dubbed *Three Cups of Tea* "inspiring [and] adventure-filled," while a *Publishers Weekly* contributor concluded that the "captivating and suspenseful ... book will win many readers' hearts."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born 1957, in MN; son of Irvin and Jerene Mortenson; married Tara Bishop (a clinical psychologist); children: two. **Education:** University of South Dakota, graduated, 1983. **Military/Wartime Service:** U.S. Army; medic; received U.S. Army Commendation Medal. **Addresses:** Home: Bozeman, MT. Office: Central Asia Institute, P.O. Box 7209, Bozeman, MT 59771. **E-mail:** cai@ikat.org.

AWARDS

David Brower Conservation Award, American Alpine Club, 1998; Peacemaker Award, Montana Community Mediation Center, 2002; Golden Piton Award, *Climbing Magazine*, 2003, for humanitarian effort; Vincent Lombardi Champion Award, 2003, for humanitarian service; Peacemaker of the Year award, Benedictine Monks (Santa Fe, NM), 2003; Outdoor Person of the Year, *Outdoor Magazine*, 2003; Salzburg Seminar fellow, 2003; Freedom Forum Free Spirit Award, National Press Club, 2004; Jeanette Rankin Peace Award, Institute for Peace, 2004; Anti- Terror Award, *Men's Journal*, 2005; Humanitarian of the Year Award for Montana, Red Cross, 2005; Alumni Achievement Award, University of South Dakota, 2006; Kiriya Prize for non-fiction, 2007, for *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations--One School at a Time*;

CAREER

Former emergency room nurse, San Francisco, CA; Central Asia Institute, Bozeman, MT, founder and executive director.

WRITINGS:

- (With David Oliver Relin) *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations--One School at a Time* (autobiography), Viking (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor to books, including *Sustainable Development in Central Asia*, edited by Shirin Akiner and Sander Tideman, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1998; *The Difference a Day Makes: 365 Ways to Change Your World in Just 24 Hours*, edited by Karen Jones, New World Library (Novato, CA), 2005; and *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories for a Better World: 101 Stories to Make the World a Better Place*, edited by Jack Canfield, Health Communications (Deerfield Beach, FL), 2005.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- Mortenson, Greg, and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations--One School at a Time*, Viking (New York, NY), 2006.

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- *Freedom Forum*, [http:// www.freedomforum.com/](http://www.freedomforum.com/) (July 12, 2004), brief biography of Greg Mortenson.
- *Greg Mortenson Home Page*, [http:// www.gregmortenson.com](http://www.gregmortenson.com) (August 30, 2006).
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- *Volvo for Life Awards*, [http:// www.volvoforlifeawards.com/](http://www.volvoforlifeawards.com/) (August 30, 2006), brief biography of Greg Mortenson.*

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Three Cups of Tea



Central Asia Institute



Tre Tazze di Tè

Welcome to Greg Mortenson's website!
Assalaam Alaikum (Peace Be With You).

Greg Mortenson is the co-founder (with Dr. Jean Hoerni) and Executive Director of nonprofit Central Asia Institute www.ikat.org. Since a 1 on Pakistan's K2, he has dedicated his life to promote community education and literacy programs, especially for girls, in remote mountain regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Mortenson is also founder of For Peace www.penniesforpeace.org and co-author of the #1 New Times best-seller, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace...One School At A Time* (Penguin 2007) www.threecupsoftea.com

Visit Three Cups of Tea, Central Asia Institute and Pennies for Peace websites (at left) to learn more. For more info, speaking engagement requests, or media interviews, please email: cai@ikat.org or call 47841.

Mortenson's book tour and speaking schedule is on website: www.threecupsoftea.com (2006-2009)

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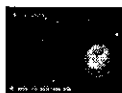
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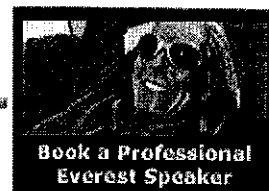
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K2: Some background and History



K2 as seen from Concordia

The local name of K2 is Chogori, which in Balti language means the king of mountains. This name is little known outside of Pakistan. It is, therefore, desirable that - K2 be used.

K2 has variously been described as the "awesome", "killer" and "savage" mountain. This is because of its massiveness in size and the numerous unsuccessful attempts made on it by various expeditions, including many American expeditions, who have made quite a few unsuccessful attempts.

K2 is a rocky mountain up to 6000 meters, beyond which it becomes an ocean of snow. The K2 peak is situated on the Pak-China border in the mighty Karakoram range. The traditional route to its base camp goes from Skardu, which is linked with Islamabad by a good road. From Skardu the route goes via Shigar-Dassu-Askole up to Concordia over the Baltoro glacier. The exact height of the peak is 8,611 meters/28,251 ft.

It was in 1856, when the British were enforcing their control over India, provoking the 1857-War-of-Independence, that a young Lieutenant of the Royal Engineers, T.G. Montgomerie, was quietly busy in surveying the mountains of Kashmir. During this survey he saw, in the far distance, a tall and conspicuous mountain in the direction of the Karakorams and immediately named it K1 ('K' stands for Karakorams). Later on, it turned out to be the beautiful mountain of Hushe valley in Khaplu area of Baltistan, called Masherbrum by locals. He also saw another tall and dominating summit behind K1 and named it K2, which turned out to be "Chogori". The name K2, however, still stands.

Lieutenant Montgomerie was a good surveyor. He was the person who planned and organized the survey of Kashmir. He was also an unofficial political adviser to Gulab Singh, the then Maharaja of Kashmir. After Gulab Singh's death in 1857, Montgomerie continued his survey work as he carried the same influence with Maharaja

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Ranjit Singh, the successor of Gulab Singh. Montgomerie trained many locals in surveying. His students did good reconnaissance work in remote areas forbidden to foreigners because of local suspicions. A famous but unfortunate student of his was Muhammad Hameed.

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In 1860, Captain Henry Haversham Godwin-Austen, of the Survey of India, went to the Baltistan area and surveyed the famous Shigar and Saltoro valleys. This greatly contributed to the knowledge of the area. He was an officer in the 24th Foot Battalion, later the South Wales Borderers, and had also served in the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852. Earlier, he had joined Montgomerie at a survey station in Kashmir in 1857. He also surveyed the Kajneg range in southern Kashmir and was the first to put Gulmarg on the map. In 1858-59, he surveyed eastern Kashmir including Jammu. In 1861, he started from Skardu and entered Braldu valley from Skoro-La (5,043m). He then climbed and surveyed the Chogolungma, Kero Lungma, Biafo and Panmah glaciers. It was from Kero Lungma that Godwin-Austen climbed the Nushik pass (4,990m/16,371 ft) and is stated to have entered the 53-km-long Hispar glacier. He was perhaps the first European to reach it. He, however, did not survey it. He was considered as one of the greatest mountaineers of the day, had great power of endurance and was immensely brave. It is a myth that the K2 peak, which was erroneously called Godwin-Austen peak, was discovered by him. It is, however, a fact that he explored the gateway to K2 (the Baltoro glacier), along with famous glaciers including Godwin-Austen glacier. This was indeed his outstanding contribution to the geography of the area.

Another famous explorer of the area was Francis Younghusband (later knighted), a noted soldier and thrill-seeker. Showing his courage and tenacity in 1887, he crossed the Gobi desert from Peking and entered India by crossing Mustagh pass. It was during this journey that he saw K2. In this way he was the first European to cross Mustagh pass. He was also the first European to set eyes on K2 from the northern side. His guide on this inward journey was a former resident of Askole village, situated at the start of Baltoro glacier, who had been living on the other side of the mountain for a very long time. When he entered the village of Askole with his guide, Younghusband was extended due courtesies. His guide was, however, looked down upon because he had shown a foreigner the possible route of invasion. Subsequently in 1903-4, Sir Francis Younghusband became the head of the famous mission to Tibet.

It was probably for the first time in 1902 that an organized expedition of Oscar J.L. Eckenstein traveled to K-2 from Baltoro glacier. The expedition was without any guide. Its aim was to explore approaches to the mountain and possibly have a try on the peak. It was, however, harsh weather which prevented it from attempting the peak. The party, however collected useful information about the upper Godwin-Austen glacier which was used as a stepping stone by expeditions in later years. Two members of the expedition - one a Swiss by the name of Dr. Jules Jacot Guillarmot and the other an Austrian by the name of Dr. V. Wesseley - succeeded in reaching 6523 meters (21,400ft) on the north-eastern ridge of K-2. The party also ascended Skyang La (6150 meters) to ascertain climbing possibilities of Skyang Kangri peak (7544 meters). Eckenstein was the first mountaineer who applied the principles of engineering to mountaineering and its

equipment in Pakistan.

In 1909, a big Italian expedition under the leadership of resolute Luigi Amadeo Giuseppe (Duke of Abruzzi) the grandson of King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy, reconnoitred K2. Its members produced a very good account of the expedition with photographs and accurate maps of Baltoro area. The Duke, however, rejected the southern and western ridges of the mountain for a climb. His party attempted the peak from the south-east ridge-which later came to be known as Abruzzi ridge - but could not proceed beyond 5560 meters because of problems with porters. The party, however, carried out a thorough reconnaissance of K2 from south to north-east. Vittono Sella, a photographer and a climber, accompanied the Duke on this expedition. Sella pass, near Godwin-Austen glacier, is named after him.

Two famous British mountaineers, Harold William Tilman and Eric Earle Shipton, explored and surveyed the north face of K2 and its subsidiary glaciers in 1937. Actually they were on a survey mission to Shaksgam valley when they also visited the Trango and Sarpo Lago glaciers. They also explored and surveyed the famous Skamri glacier. Tilman was a famous explorer, mountaineer, sailor and writer. He also distinguished himself as a planter in Kenya.

Shipton, on the other hand, was one of the significant explorers of the present century. He was Tilman's companion on most of the expeditions. Shipton was also Consul-General of India in Kashgar in 1940-42 and then in 1946-48.

In 1938, the American Alpine Club sponsored a reconnaissance party for a visit to K2 area. The party reached a height of 7925 meters after setting up eight camps. When compared with the heights climbed by previous expeditions, this seems to be a considerable advancement. Famous American mountaineers like Dr. Charles Houston and Robert Bates were in this party. Six Sherpas from Nepal were also on this expedition as porters etc. After a proper reconnaissance of the routes leading to K-2, the party rejected the north-west and north-east routes. Instead, it selected the south-east ridge (Abruzzi ridge). It was the shortage of food supplies that forced Houston and Petzoldt to return to lower altitudes. In the opinion of the party it was through this ridge that K2 peak could be climbed, which eventually proved correct.

The next year saw another American expedition on K2. It was led by Fritz Hermann Ernst Wiessner, a German-American chemist and mountaineer. The expedition, along with nine Sherpas, made very good progress on the already-identified south-east ridge. Two members and five Sherpas set up Camp VIII at about 7711 meters and left one member by the name of Dudley Wolfe in this camp as he had fallen sick. Wiessner, along with one Sherpa, went up to approximately 8382 meters. On their way back they found that Wolfe was short of food. They, therefore, hurriedly brought him down to camp VII and made him stay there. They then descended in search of food and aid but found all camps abandoned until they reached camp II. Immediately three Sherpas were sent to rescue Wolfe. They, however, did not return. In this way, Wolfe and the Sherpas died on the K2. What a tragic but heroic death.

Another American attempt on K2 was

made in 1953. The expedition leader was Dr. Charles Houston, who had also led the 1938 American expedition on this peak. Dr. Houston, a doctor and professor, is noted for his contribution to research on the effects of high altitude on human body and diseases originating from such effects. One Pakistani, late Colonel M. Ataullah, Vice President, Karakoram Club of Pakistan, accompanied the party. This time the party took porters from Hunza instead of Sherpas from Nepal. As against the previous expeditions, which entered Baltistan from Srinagar (in the Indian occupied Kashmir) through a very long route, the party flew into Skardu and then adopted the traditional route to K2 over Baltoro glacier.



K2 Base Camp

It was at Camp VIII, at about 7772 meters that the party was hit by a blizzard which lasted many days. On the 7th of August one member, Arthur Gilkey, developed thrombophlebitis. In view of his serious condition it was decided to start descent in spite of bad weather. At the end of the day, the party was involved in a "fall on a steep slope as a result of a slip and tangling of ropes". Luckily nobody was seriously injured. Subsequently all members assembled at the nearby camp VII. Gilkey was secured on the snow slope with two ice axes until a party could be mustered to bring him across the slope to the camp. However, when three members of the party returned to Gilkey, they found that he had been swept away by an avalanche. It took rest of the party five hard days to reach the base camp. On reaching there, the party immediately started for Skardu because one of the members, George Bell, had very bad frost-bitten feet. In spite of their very best efforts, the Americans could not climb K2 from the south-east ridge.

In 1954, an Italian expedition came to Pakistan to try its luck on K2. It consisted of twelve climbers and four scientists and was led by veteran mountaineer, Professor Ardito Desio, who had come to these mountains with Italian expeditions before the World War II. Colonel M. Ataullah and Arshad Munir accompanied the expedition from Karakoram Club of Pakistan. Captain (later Lt. General) G.S. Butt was the liaison officer.

Poor weather hindered the progress of the party for a pretty long time. As soon as the weather cleared, the party made very good progress and set up camp II. It was at this camp that one of its members, Mario Puchoz, a 36-year old guide, died of pneumonia on the 21st June. It is believed that he had contracted high altitude pulmonary oedema (water on the lungs) which was not well known at the time and does not respond to antibiotics.

The party established six more camps on the south-east ridge. Camp IX was a bivouac. On the 31st of July, Lino Lacedelli and Achille Compagnoni started from the bivouac. They continued their assault and reached the summit at six in the evening. After staying for a while they started descending and reached Camp VIII round about eleven at night. In this way the saga of K2 ended.

The peak has now been climbed from almost all ridges.

[K2 2003 Expeditions and News Index](#)

[K2 Featured Expedition: Simone Moro attempts Nanga Parbat \(8125 meters\), K2 \(8611 meters\) and Broad Peak \(8047 meters\) all in two months!](#)

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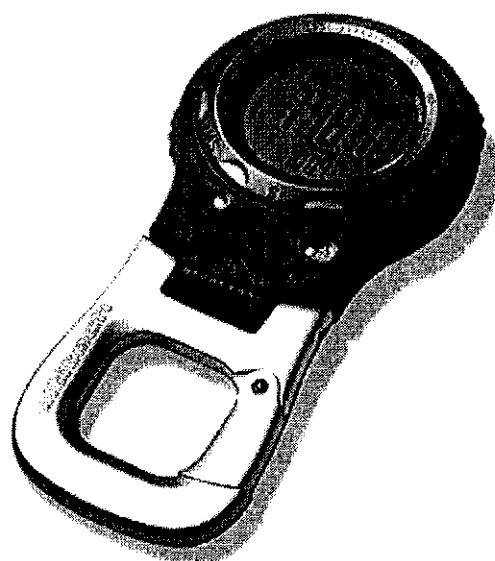
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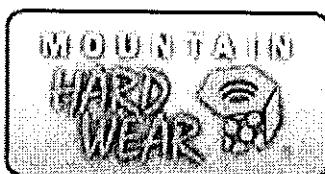
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Three Cups of Tea

Greg Mortenson


David Oliver Relin

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INTRODUCTION

Three Cups of Tea is the true story of one of the most extraordinary humanitarian missions. In 1993, a young American mountain climber named Greg Mortenson stumbles into a tiny village in Pakistan's beautiful and desperately poor Karakoram Himalaya region. Sick, exhausted, and after a failing to scale the summit of K2, Mortenson regains his strength and his will to live through the generosity of the people of the village of Korphe. Before he leaves, Mortenson makes a promise that will profoundly change both the villagers' lives and his own—he will return and build them a school.

The book traces how Mortenson kept this promise (and many more) in the high country of northern Afghanistan, despite considerable odds. The region is remote and dangerous, a notorious ground for Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists. In the course of his work, Mortenson was kidnapped, threatened with death. He endured local rivalries, deep misunderstandings, jealousy, and, to mention treacherous roads and epic weather. But he believed passionately that balance education, for boys and girls alike, is the most effective way to combat the violent intolerance of terrorism. To date, Mortenson's Central Asia Institute has constructed fifty-five schools, and continues.

Mortenson initially approached Karakoram as a climber and he never lost the mountaineer's love for the region's austere beauty and incredible physical challenges. His coauthor David Oliver Relin evokes high-altitude landscapes haunted by glaciers, snow leopards, and the deaths of climbers. As Mortenson transformed himself from down-and-out climbing bum to the director of a large-scale enterprise, he came to appreciate more and more deeply the struggles that people of the region face.

every day—struggles that have intensified with the recent explosion of war and sectarian

In the course of this narrative, readers come to know Mortenson as a friend, a husband, a traveling companion, a son and brother, and also as a flawed human being. Mortenson runs along the way and frustrated his friends and family. Relin does not shy away from depicting exasperating qualities—his restlessness, disorganization, sleeplessness, and utter disreputability. But Mortenson never asks others to make sacrifices that he has not already made time and time again.

The war-torn mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan appear in the news as the breeding ground for terrorist training camps, Al Qaeda hide-outs, and fierce religious extremism. In *Three Cups of Tea*, Mortenson and Relin take readers behind the headlines to reveal the true heart and soul of the region and to show how one man's promise might be enough to change the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Greg Mortenson is the director of the Central Asia Institute. A resident of Montana, he spends several months of the year in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

David Oliver Relin is a contributing editor for *Parade* magazine and *Skiing* magazine. He has won more than forty national awards for his work as a writer and editor.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There is a telling passage about Mortenson's change of direction at the start of the book. One evening, he went to bed by a yak dung fire with a mountaineer who'd lost his way, and by the time he'd shared a pot of butter tea with his hosts and laced up his boots, he'd become a humanitarian who'd found a meaningful path to follow for the rest of his life." What happened made Mortenson particularly ripe for such a transformation? Has anything similar happened in your life?
2. Relin gives a "warts and all" portrait of Mortenson, showing him as a hero but also as a flawed human being with some exasperating traits. Talk about how Relin chose to write about Mortenson's character—his choice of details, his perspective, the way he constructs or presents Mortenson someone you'd like to get to know, work with, or have as a neighbor or friend.
3. At the heart of the book is a powerful but simple political message: we each as individuals have the power to change the world, one cup of tea at a time. Yet the book powerfully dramatizes the obstacles in the way of this philosophy: bloody wars waged by huge armies, prejudice, religious extremism, cultural barriers. What do you think of the "one cup of tea at a time" philosophy?

Do you think Mortenson's vision can work for lasting and meaningful change?

4. Have you ever known anyone like Mortenson? Have you ever had the experience of making a difference yourself through acts of generosity, aid, or leadership?
5. The Balti people are fierce yet extremely hospitable, kind yet rigid, determined to better themselves yet stuck in the past. Discuss your reactions to them and the other groups that Mortenson tries to help.
6. After Haji Ali's family saves Greg's life, he reflects that he could never "imagine the debt he felt to his hosts in Korphe." Discuss this sense of indebtedness as key to Mortenson's character. Why was Mortenson compelled to return to the region again and again? In your opinion, does he repay his debt by the end of the book?
7. References to paradise run throughout the book—Mortenson's childhood home in Tangierian mountain scenery, even Berkeley, California, are all referred to as "paradise." Discuss the concept of paradise, lost and regained, and how it influences Mortenson's mission.
8. Mortenson's transition from climbing bum to humanitarian hero seems very abrupt. However, looking back, it's clear that his sense of mission is rooted in his childhood, the values of his parents, and his relationship with his sister Christa. Discuss the various facets of Mortenson's character—the freewheeling mountain climber, the ER nurse, the devoted son and brother and the leader of a humanitarian cause. Do you view him as continuing the work his father started?
9. "I expected something like this from an ignorant village mullah, but to get those kinds of letters from my fellow Americans made me wonder whether I should just give up," Mortenson remarked after he started getting hate mail in the wake of September 11. What was your reaction to the letters Mortenson received?
10. Mortenson hits many bumps in the road—he's broke, his girlfriend dumps him, he's forced to build a bridge before he can build the school, his health suffers, and he drives his family crazy. Discuss his repeated brushes with failure and how they influenced your opinion of Mortenson's efforts.
11. The authors write that "the Balti held the key to a kind of uncomplicated happiness that was disappearing in the developing world." This peaceful simplicity of life seems to be what attracts Mortenson to the villagers. Discuss the pros and cons of bringing civilization to the mountain community.
12. Much of the book is a meditation on what it means to be a foreigner assimilating with another culture. Discuss your own experiences with foreign cultures—things that you have learned, mistakes you have made, misunderstandings you have endured.
13. Did the book change your views toward Islam or Muslims? Consider the cleric Syed Abbas who also the cleric who called a fatwa on Mortenson. Syed Abbas implores American people into our hearts and see that the great majority of us are not terrorists, but good and simple people.

Inspired to learn more about the area?