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Book Review - Pené Hollingworth

The Importance of Three Cups of Tea

It was the best Christmas present ever. My husband had given me Greg Mortenson's new book *Stones into Schools*. With it came a ticket for an evening with Greg at the Mulgrave School in West Vancouver. The event was being sponsored by Kidsbooks through their three stores in the Lower Mainland. It turned out to be a stellar evening.

Mortenson is also the author of several children's books. The son of a missionary family, he is the product of an upbringing in Tanzania and the US. He learned from his father the need for education and facilities, to better the conditions of poverty stricken populations, but his endeavour to start on his mission came purely by accident.

He was living in the US and working as a nurse when he took time off to indulge his passion for mountain climbing. The mountain he chose with friends, this time, was K2 in the Karakoram Range on the border between Pakistan, China and Afghanistan. He nearly made it to the top, but having failed to reach his goal and feeling dejected, he became separated from his companions and guide and lost his way. After a feat of survival overnight on a glacier he finally stumbled into the remote village of Korphe, in Baltistan, Pakistan, where the hospitable villagers took him in and treated him.

In gratitude, and having observed that the boys of the village were trying to learn without a trained schoolteacher and had to write in the sand, he promised the village leader Haji Ali that he would return and build them a school. That is how it all began.

Greg's books tell of his brushes with the Taliban and his difficulties with cultural differences, supplies, and transportation in very isolated regions. But they also tell of his incredible determination to build schools to help the people of the remote areas, especially girls. In the process of helping the children and previously ignored regions of Pakistan, he has become an expert on the area and with his warm, affable style and a genuine respect for all people, he has achieved what many military leaders would love to have achieved.

Greg's mantra for his work is an old African proverb 'If you

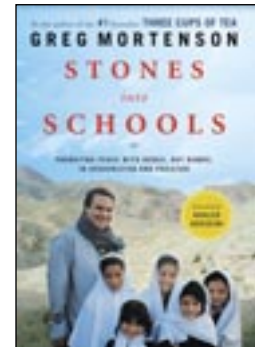
educate a boy, you educate an individual. If you educate a girl, you educate a community.' His life work has become to educate girls of regions that previously considered girls only good for nurturing and working for the family.

He has currently built 130 schools under the auspices of his organization called the Central Asia Institute (CIA). His fame in Central Asia has led to his being approached by tribal leaders from remote parts of Afghanistan to build schools for their children.

In Year 2000 under the Taliban regime, Afghanistan, with a population similar to Canada's, was educating 800,000 boys. In 2010, with Mortensen's help and input from the rest of the world, 8.4 million children are being educated and 2.5 million of those are girls. This is a huge leap forward and one that will hopefully be sustained. In Pakistan there are 110 million children without access to schools and of those 78 million are girls. The literacy rate for girls is 3 to 5%.

Greg's efforts have been recognized by the Pakistan government and he has helped the isolated areas that the government was not reaching. He believes that the more remote areas should get the help of CAI as they are unlikely to be noticed by their own governments.

Greg is a gentle friendly giant of a man, who looked like he would be more comfortable in the wilds of Pakistan wearing his



Pakistani clothes.

He impressed those who were lucky enough to attend his evening by starting with a book signing for the children in the audience. His manner with the children was such that you could see he was relating to all of them.

They were so proud to meet him and I am sure that many were inspired to do good works and set new goals for themselves.



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Mortenson is a class act. His attitude as he talks passionately about his favourite subject is humble and he projects an air of almost disbelief that his life has turned out the way it has.

He told of his meetings with tribal chiefs and of course the necessity of imbibing in the many cups of tea. It seems that three cups of tea with one person makes you a friend for life. Hence the title for his first book.

He also told of heartening news from the United States. He says that the American military 'really get it' and today *Three Cups of Tea* is required reading for all military recruits. The Joint Chiefs of Staff feel that book imparts the lessons that all the young recruits going overseas need to understand: 1. Listen 2. Respect 3. Build Relationships.

The American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, approached Greg and asked to go to Afghanistan with him, as he had also been impressed by what he had read. Greg said that it was okay with him, but he would have to consult with the tribal leaders and see if they also agreed to a visit from such a high-ranking military official. (Another lesson to be learned here, respect and communication.) They agreed and Admiral Mullen went and opened one of Greg's schools in Afghanistan.

Greg has had a close relationship with General Rick Hillier Chief of Defence Staff assigned to the Canadian mission in Afghanistan in 2004 and will confer with our new Chief of Defence Staff, Walter Natynczyk at the military's request.

Greg is most impressed with the attitude of the Canadians in Afghanistan and wishes that all troops and leaders could emulate them. He feels that the original intention of our troops as peacekeepers is commendable and our continued attempts to help the Afghan people are what is needed.

One of his main concerns is that the tribal chiefs in these areas should be consulted before major decisions regarding

their countries are made.

For those of you like myself, who had read *Three Cups of Tea* and were concerned that the Taliban had reversed much of Greg's work with the recent destruction of 2,000 schools for girls, it seems that very few of CAI's schools have suffered.

The employment of local people is a key to all the progress. Greg credits the CAI's method, of training teachers from villages and giving construction components for villagers to build the schools themselves, with protecting the schools. The people of these villages want schools and education for both boys and girls.

It is inspiring to understand the influence of just one man, a mountain climber from Montana. His influence on policies and the lives of neglected peoples of Central Asia will live on long after him. In the words of Martin Luther King: 'Even if the world ends tomorrow I will plant my seed today.'

Both of Greg's books are an interesting and inspiring read. Greg relates a telling anecdote. It seems that the people at Penguin Books wanted the subtitle of *Three Cups of Tea* to read, 'One man's mission to fight terrorism, one school at a time' Greg disagreed, saying that if the hardcover book didn't sell well with this subtitle, then it should be as he wanted on the paperback version: 'One man's mission to promote peace one school at a time.' You'll see which was the most popular version at your local bookstore. The paperback has been at the top of the bestseller list in both the US and Canada for three years now.

For those wishing to contribute to Greg's effort to provide schools in Central Asia, visit www.ikat.org. Greg also has a program that has been adopted by over 4,000 schools: Pennies for Peace www.penniesforpeace.org.
Pené Hollingworth is an international tourguide extraordinaire.