

Building Peace, One School at a Time
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First Reading

“Building a Bridge”

Excerpted from Mortenson’s second book, Stones Into Schools.

In the introduction to *Stones Into Schools*, Mortenson explains that once he had raised the money in the United States to build his first school, he returned to the village of Korphe with a caravan of jeeps hauling the building supplies, only to be told by the village elder that before they could start construction on the school, they would have to build a bridge. The reason? It would be impossible to ferry the construction materials over the roaring Braldu [River] inside the only device spanning the river, a rickety wooden basket suspended beneath a 350-foot cable.

[He writes] Perhaps I should have thought of this earlier; in any case, the unexpected turn of events seemed like a disaster. It forced me to retreat back to the United States, where I had to convince my main benefactor to contribute even *more* money, which was then used to purchase even *more* construction materials and transport these supplies to the edge of the Braldu, where the residents of Korphe built a 282-foot-long suspension bridge over the river. In the end, the whole exercise set the project back nearly two years.

At the time, I found this detour and its delays utterly maddening. Only years later did I begin to appreciate the enormous symbolic significance of the fact that before building a school, it was imperative to build a bridge. The school, of course, would house all of the hopes that are raised by the promise of education. But the bridge represented something more elemental: the relationships upon which those hopes would be sustained over time—and without which any promise would amount to little more than empty words.

...since then each and every school we have built has been preceded by a bridge. Not necessarily a physical structure, but a span of emotional links that are forged over many years and many shared cups of tea.

Second Reading

“The Book”

(Lyrics of a traditional Afghan children’s song)

I'm a friend of children
I am beautiful and eloquent.
I have lots of words
Hidden in my heart.

Open my heart, my treasure house
So I can tell you my secrets,
Tell you a hundred stories.

I am a friend of children
I'm beautiful and eloquent

I have lots of words
Hidden in my heart.

Tell you sweet stories, ancient wisdom,
Tell you tales and sing you songs.

Everyone who pays attention to me
Learns to speak beautifully and well.
With me you will gain knowledge and wisdom.
Become my close friend,
and with me you will always have company.

I am a friend of children
I am beautiful and eloquent.
I have lots of words
Hidden in my heart.

Sermon “Building Peace, One School at a Time”

Last Wednesday evening at sundown was the beginning of Ramadan, a holy month for our Muslim brothers and sisters all over the world. During Ramadan, Muslims are acutely observant of the five-times-a-day practice of engaging in ritual prayers while facing toward Mecca. I have been imagining schoolchildren in the high mountain regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan around noon, just before they break for lunch. Boys and girls perform the necessary ablutions, turn toward Mecca (for them that would be southwest), roll out their prayer rugs and participate in the ancient and significant ritual of prayer.

Yes, boys *and girls*. For despite what we tend to think of as the absolute ban on educating girls in conservative Muslim countries — especially in the isolated and primitive areas of northern Pakistan and Afghanistan — there are thousands of girls in elementary and secondary schools alongside the boys (or at least under the same roof, though perhaps in separate rooms). And for this opportunity to learn, the children can thank a soft-spoken American named Greg Mortenson.

He is an amazing man who has accomplished amazing results in promoting peace in Pakistan and Afghanistan through helping the local people build schools for their children. His books, *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones Into Schools*, describing his activities (as John told you earlier), have been huge bestsellers in 41 countries. I see him as an exemplar shining a light not only to light up the possibilities of education for young women in these war-torn and devastated countries, but also to light up the possibilities for peace based on the simple human activities of listening and building relationships. He inspires me, and I hope to inspire you this morning by telling you a little bit about him.

But first we need some back story, some context to help us understand the present situation, especially in Afghanistan, where we currently still have troops and have had for the past nine years. We Americans need to know and understand this history.

Afghanistan lies along the main route between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. It has always been subject to invasion by forces who sought control of the trade routes and access to natural resources. As a result, it is deeply embedded in the Afghan psyche to be warriors and to defend their land most fiercely. At the same time, the harsh and mountainous

terrain keeps villagers isolated from one another, so that power has always been wielded more by local tribal leaders than by any centralized government.

At Christmastime, 1979, the Soviet Union sent troops into Afghanistan at the request of the weak Communist government that they supported, and in hope of halting the spread of westernization across Central Asia. Millions of lives were lost and millions of Afghans fled into Pakistan and Iran to protect themselves from the ruthless bloodshed. Seeing an opportunity to dishonor the Russians and end the cold war, the United States Central Intelligence Agency was providing covert financial support to the mujahadin warriors who made up a loosely-organized alliance of resistance to the Soviet troops.

If you saw the movie “Charlie Wilson’s War,” you will recall the horrific scenes of the refugee camps in Pakistan and the fierce determination of the mujahadin to resist the Russians down to the last man, if necessary. But with the assistance of literally billions of dollars from the United States (always funneled through other countries who were willing to manufacture and ship weapons to Afghanistan), eventually the Russians acknowledged defeat and withdrew from the country in 1989.

And then, as we have so often done before and since, the United States turned its back. The cold war had ended, the Berlin Wall came down, democratic governments rose in former Soviet bloc countries, and our attention turned elsewhere. Meanwhile, the mujahadin warlords who had fought so fiercely against the Russians reverted to their tribal conflicts, using weapons provided by the U.S to battle each other for power.

During the early 1990’s, petty chieftains and gangs of thugs indulged in looting, rape and murder, unleashing widespread chaos throughout Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan, and giving rise to an atmosphere of public revulsion, fear and betrayal.

It was the perfect situation for a new jihad, a new effort to restore righteousness and stability by uniting the country under the banner of a “true Islamic order.” Enter the Taliban. By the end of 1996, the Taliban — largely made up of young men who had been indoctrinated with a virulent and radical brand of Islamist ideology — controlled over 2/3 of the country and had established a draconian regime “that blended sadism with lunacy.”¹ (These are the words of Greg Mortenson.)

Bizarre edicts were issued forbidding people from playing cards, listening to music, laughing in public or flying a kite. (Remember *The Kite Runner*?) The Taliban fiercely opposed anything that led to deviation from their strict interpretation of the Koran, with particular emphasis on restricting the freedom of movement of their daughters, sisters and mothers.

During the years that the Taliban was strengthening its strangle-hold on Afghan culture, an American mountaineer named Greg Mortenson was spending as much time as he could in the nearby mountains of northern Pakistan, where the world’s highest peaks are located. In the States he worked as an emergency room nurse; he lived in his car and owned very few possessions other than his climbing gear. The nature of his work allowed him to travel for long periods of time to where the mountains beckoned, and he was no stranger to the Karkoram Range and the other gigantic mountains of central Asia.

¹ Mortenson, Greg, *Stones Into Schools*, Viking Press, 2009, p. 71. The history provided in these paragraphs is a condensation of Mortenson’s words, pages 69-72.

It was in September 1993, immediately after a failed attempt to scale K-2, the second-highest mountain in the world, that he had an encounter with the people of a tiny village at the base of the mountain, an encounter that probably saved his life, and certainly changed it and the lives of thousands of children in the years since.

Having become separated from his climbing partner and the men carrying their gear, he lost his way on the mountainous descent and eventually wandered into the village of Korphe, perched on a rocky shelf 800 feet above the rushing Braldu river. Mortenson was taken in by the village chief, Haji Ali, and ended up staying in the village for over a month while he regained his strength under the villagers' tender and hospitable care.

When Mortenson was well enough to begin returning the villagers' kindness, he gave away much of his gear and endeared himself to them by offering simple medical care — treating wounds and sores with antibiotic ointment from his medical kit, setting broken bones and offering painkillers. A quiet and observant man accustomed more to listening than speaking, Mortenson realized that their apparently idyllic life was fraught with disease, malnutrition, and a staggering rate of maternal and infant mortality.

One day he asked to see the village school, and he was taken up a steep path to a flat spot overlooking the river. There (quoting from the book)

He was appalled to see eighty-two children, seventy-eight boys and the four girls who had the pluck to join them, kneeling on the frosty ground, in the open. Haji Ali... said that the village had no school, and the Pakistani government didn't provide a teacher. A teacher cost the equivalent of one dollar a day, he explained, which was more than the village could afford. So they shared a teacher with [a neighboring village, and when the teacher was away] the children were left alone to practice the lessons he left behind.

He goes on:

Most [of them] scratched in the dirt with sticks they'd brought for that purpose. The more fortunate... had slate boards they wrote on with sticks dipped in a mixture of mud and water. "Can you imagine a fourth-grade class in America, alone, without a teacher, sitting there quietly and working on their lessons?" Mortenson asked himself. "I felt like my heart was being torn out. There was a fierceness in their desire to learn, despite how mightily everything was stacked against them, ...and I knew I had to do something."²

That was the beginning of an effort that has continued for seventeen years, resulting in the building of 131 schools which are now educating 158,000 children. Mortenson's efforts have also led to bridges and roads being built, initially simply to get the building supplies to the intended sites of the schools, but of course also allowing villagers to travel and trade more easily and have better access to medical care.

It started with a promise. Two men looking into each other's eyes, one man's hands on the other's shoulders, promising that he would build a school for the children. And I believe it's the heartfelt sincerity of that first promise — the 100% intention to fulfill that promise no matter what — that lies behind the success of Greg Mortenson and the Central Asia Institute he initiated

² *Three Cups of Tea*, p. 32.

to support his efforts. Many other promises have been made since that first one on the windswept ledge above the Braldu River, and Mortenson's books tell the fascinating and detailed (and often hair-raising) stories of what it took to make those promises come true.

The importance of educating girls in developing countries can not be overstated. We know about this because of the work this congregation has done to help educate young women in Mozambique.

Young women are the biggest potential agents of change in the developing world; no other factor comes even close to matching the cascade of positive changes triggered by teaching one single girl how to read and write — and in impoverished Muslim societies, the ripple effects of female literacy can be profound.

For example, in Muslim societies a person who has been manipulated into believing in extremist violence or terrorism will often seek the permission of his mother before he may join a militant jihad, and educated women, as a rule, will withhold their blessing for such things. After 9/11, when desertions from the Taliban increased dramatically, they began targeting their recruitment efforts on regions where female literacy was especially low.³

What I found surprising in reading these books was the passionate desire of the tribal people that their children — both sons and daughters — receive an education. They know intuitively what the experts proclaim: that the lives of their children will be better if they are educated. And they want that more than almost anything else. In the Koran, the first word of the revelation to Muhammad the prophet is the Arabic word "iqra." And "iqra" means "read."

I know that many of you have read *Three Cups of Tea* for our "Serious Stuff" Book Group, and I presume that some have also read *Stones Into Schools*. And I wonder if you have wondered — as I have — "Why hasn't this guy been killed?" When so many NATO troops have succumbed to snipers and IED's, and even medical aid workers are abducted and assassinated with increasing frequency in the same areas where Mortenson is working, what is it about him that has protected him so far?

I think that part of the answer is his simplicity and sincerity. This whole effort started as one man *whose motivation was gratitude* and whose style was quiet observation. He is deeply interested in the people he serves and works with, and deeply respectful of their values and the ways they move in the world. He is not out to change them, to westernize them or proselytize or in any way impose his ideas on them. He wants what they want: a better life for their children.

Back in 1996 he was kidnapped and held for eight days by Taliban in Waziristan, a tribal territory that forms a buffer zone between Pakistan and Afghanistan. He wasn't tortured, but "they weren't very friendly with me," was his understated description of the experience to Bill Moyers in a televised interview last January⁴. After a few days of terror and depression, he pulled himself together and realized that his best chance of being released would be to make friends with his captors, and he knew that showing interest in their faith would be a good way to do that. He requested a Koran and spent hours respectfully turning its dusty pages (though he didn't read Arabic) and praying five times a day along with his guards. He also told his captors that his wife was expecting their first child, a son — actually he knew that the baby would be a

³ Mortenson, Greg, *Stones Into Schools*, p. 15.

⁴ <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/01152010/watch2.html>

girl, but he figured that a lie under these circumstances was forgivable, since the birth of a first son was a great cause for celebration in this Pashtun culture.

But probably what ultimately freed him was the information his captors managed to gather about him: that his work among them was to build schools for their children. They released him with a great celebration — a bonfire, roasted goat, wild dancing and fusillades of AK-47 automatic weapons shot off in celebration. He was perplexed when they pressed 10,000 rupees on him (the equivalent of about \$300), and his captor explained “For your schools! So *Inshallah*, you’ll build many more!”⁵

Another thing about Mortenson that may be contributing to his safe passage through frightfully dangerous areas is his ability to find local allies. He has learned several of the languages spoken in this region, so that he can move fairly easily among the population, and he keeps his eyes open for people with the resources to help him build relationships with local tribal leaders.

The Taliban operate by driving a wedge between the generations, by cutting the young men off from their elders and isolating them so that they can indoctrinate them with their virulent ideology. Mortenson learned early on always to seek out the elders and befriend them before attempting to enlist the support of the village for building a school or a road.

Although the Central Asia Institute — Mortenson’s non-profit agency that raises the money to build schools and train teachers — is officially headquartered in Bozeman, Montana, the real work on the ground comes through the field staff, a group of renegades and misfits (according to Mortenson) whom he has hired based more on gut instinct than on their previous experience or education (often sorely lacking). This group of twelve men, whom he affectionately calls The Dirty Dozen, includes a mountaineers’ cook and a porter, a taxi driver who promptly quit his job while driving Mortenson from the airport to his hotel in Islamabad and joined the staff, and a former Kashmiri guerilla and Taliban fighter who much preferred to be a teacher. It is to this ragtag group that Mortenson gives the credit for the success of the school building program.

So I’d like to leave you with this thought as we all ponder the great work and the legacy of Greg Mortenson and his Dirty Dozen. Here’s a man who is working with the poorest of the poor in a politically unstable country that is all too familiar with foreign occupation. He surrounds himself with locals — twelve men from various walks of life who believe in his vision and have made great personal sacrifices to be part of the work necessary to bring it about. He walks from village to village with the hope and vision of bringing the people a better life, putting himself into danger and ignoring the laws, social customs, and religious practices which would hinder his objectives.

Does this remind you of someone? A guy with a dozen disciples and dirty feet, beloved of the marginalized, a man with a vision and a huge supply of courage, a risk-taker, ...

Now I'm not saying that Greg Mortenson is our 21st century Jesus. I suggest this analogy not to increase your respect for Greg Mortenson and the CAI, but to increase your respect for Jesus and the original message of love and peace that he preached. Try to imagine Jesus as he appeared to his contemporaries, not with all the baggage of Christendom that has been heaped on

⁵ *Three Cups of Tea*, pp 163-173.

him by other people with a different agenda through the ensuing centuries, but as a man with a vision who was willing to go to enormous risks to fulfill it.

Jesus came to a bad end, and too soon. Greg Mortenson is still out there, still casting his vision of a better world for Muslim children, still promoting peace through projects that are based in hope and not fear. What an example for all of us, to listen more and talk less, to be respectful and build friendships with those who would otherwise be strangers.

Let it be so.

Amen.

Closing Words

“A Beacon of Hope”

These are Greg Mortenson’s words, writing about the school that is the most remote and highest of all the schools constructed in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which stands at 12,480 feet.

No school is closer to my heart than the one in Bozai Gumbaz, because none was carved so directly and so indisputably from the bedrock of human dignity and self-worth.

By succeeding at an endeavor in which a government, an army, and an NGO had failed, a band of impoverished nomads were able to construct, on the loftiest and most distant corner of their republic, something even greater than a school. They had raised a beacon of hope that called out not only to the Kirghiz themselves, but also to every village and town in Afghanistan where children yearn for education, and where fathers and mothers dream of building a school whose doors will open not only to their sons but also to their daughters.

... Today that [beacon shines forth from] the stones that were used to build the walls of the school, and as the water falls out of the sky and over those stones, [hope is] carried down from the mountains and into the fields and gardens and orchards of Afghanistan. And as the water and the words rush past, who can fail to turn to his neighbor and whisper, with humility and awe—if *this* is what the weakest, the least valued, the most neglected among us are capable of achieving, truly is there anything we cannot do?