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THREE CUPS *• of •* DECEIT

JON KRAKAUER

Also by Jon Krakauer

Eiger Dreams

Into the Wild

Into Thin Air

Under the Banner of Heaven

Where Men Win Glory

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Cover photograph: The school at Bozai
Gumbaz,
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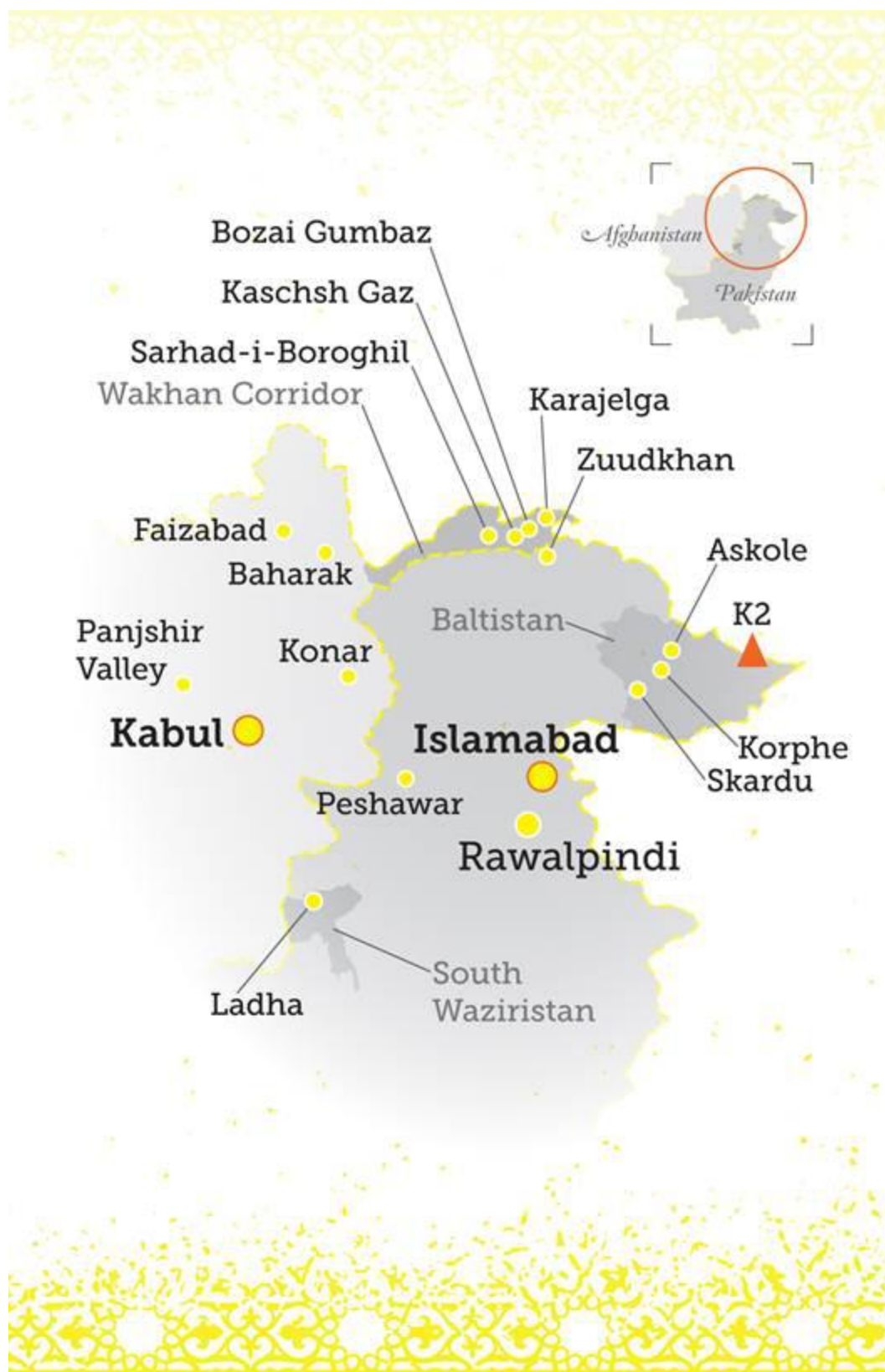
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THREE CUPS *of* DECEIT

How Greg Mortenson, Humanitarian
Hero,
Lost His Way

Jon Krakauer

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Dramatis Personae

Greg Mortenson: Executive director and co-founder of the Central Asia Institute (CAI); co-author of *Three Cups of Tea*; author of *Stones into Schools*

David Oliver Relin: Co-author of *Three Cups of Tea*

Christa Mortenson: Greg's youngest sister, who died in 1992

Mouzafer Ali: Resident of Pakistan's Baltistan region whom Mortenson hired to carry his backpack from the base of K2 to the village of Askole in September 1993

Haji Ali: Chieftain of a Balti village called Korphe, located across the Braldu River from Askole

Scott Darsney: Greg Mortenson's climbing partner on K2 in 1993

Yakub: Friend of Mouzafer Ali whom Darsney hired to carry his backpack from the base of K2 to the village of Askole in 1993

Akhmalu: Expedition cook for Greg Mortenson and his teammates on K2 in 1993; shortly after the expedition ended, Mortenson visited Akhmalu's village, Khane, and promised to build a school there

Erica Stone: Executive director of the American Himalayan Foundation

Jean Hoerni: Theoretical physicist and co-founder of CAI who gave Greg Mortenson \$12,000 in 1994 to build his first school in Pakistan, and in 1996 donated \$1 million to CAI

Mohammed Ali Changazi: Tour operator and trekking agent who managed the logistics for Mortenson's 1993 K2 expedition; adopted son of Haji Ali

Tara Bishop: Greg Mortenson's wife, a clinical psychologist; the daughter of Barry Bishop

Naimat Gul Mahsud: A member of the Mahsud tribe who met Mortenson in the Pakistani city of Rawalpindi in July 1996 and, at Mortenson's request, drove him to Ladha, South Waziristan, the Mahsud ancestral homeland, where he was Mortenson's host

Mansur Khan Mahsud: Director of research at the FATA Research Centre who accompanied Mortenson on sightseeing excursions in South Waziristan in July 1996, during the period Mortenson claims the Taliban held him captive

Sangi Marjan: Commissioner of education in Ladha, South Waziristan, who met with Mortenson in July 1996 to discuss education in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)

Hussein Mohammed: Pseudonym of a member of the Mahsud tribe who is acquainted with Naimat Gul Mahsud

Jennifer Wilson: Jean Hoerni's third wife, who served on the CAI board of directors from 1997 to 2001

Tom Vaughan: Chairman of CAI's board of directors, 1997–2001

Tom Hornbein: American physician and mountaineer renowned for making the first ascent of the West Ridge of Mount Everest in 1963; invited to join the CAI board in 1999, he became its chairman in 2001 and resigned in 2002

Barry Bishop: Tara Bishop's father; Tom Hornbein's teammate on Everest in 1963

Gordon Wiltsie: Eminent photographer and mountaineer, member of the CAI board of directors, 1998–2002

Sally Uhlmann: Businesswoman and member of the CAI board of directors, 2000–2002

King Zaher Shah: King of Afghanistan 1933–1973, who died in 2007

Sadhar Khan: Powerful warlord, or *qomandan*, in the northern Afghanistan province of Badakhshan

Mostapha Zaher: Grandson of King Zaher Shah

Debbie Raynor: Chief financial officer of CAI, 2003–2004

Daniel Borochoff: President of the American Institute of Philanthropy, a charity watchdog organization

Ghulam Parvi: CAI's program manager in Pakistan, 1996–June 2010

Tanya Rosen: Wildlife researcher and international lawyer who has conducted extensive research in Baltistan

Kate DeClerk: CAI's international program director, 2003–2004

Mike Bryan: Journalist Mortenson hired to ghostwrite an early draft of *Stones into Schools*

Kevin Fedarko: Journalist who wrote “He Fights Terror With Books,” the 2003 *Parade* magazine article that established Mortenson's reputation; second ghostwriter of *Stones into Schools*

Roshan Khan: Kyrgyz horseman whom Mortenson purportedly promised, in 1999, to build a school in Bozai Gumbaz

Abdul Rashid Khan: Supreme leader of the Afghan Kyrgyz people whom Mortenson met in the Afghan city of Baharak in 2005; father of Roshan Khan

Ted Callahan: American anthropologist and mountaineer Mortenson hired in 2006 to write a report about the feasibility of building a school for Kyrgyz nomads in northeastern Afghanistan's remote Wakhan Corridor

Sarfraz Khan: Pakistani who oversees CAI's programs in northern Pakistan and northern Afghanistan

Whitney Azoy: Cultural anthropologist who has spent many years working in Afghanistan; Ted Callahan's friend and mentor

Colonel Ilyas Mirza: Retired Pakistani military officer who serves as CAI's chief operations director in Islamabad

Haji Osman: Kyrgyz chieftain in the Afghan Pamir near the Bozai Gumbaz school

Ghial Beg: Headman of an Afghan village named Kret in the Wakhan Corridor, where CAI built a school



Part I

THE CREATION MYTH

“When it comes right down to it I am nothing more than a fellow who took a wrong turn in the mountains and never quite managed to find his way home.”

—Greg Mortenson, *Stones into Schools*

GREG MORTENSON DOESN'T HIDE his light under a bushel. He makes more than 160 public appearances annually, in all parts of the country and abroad, and frequently appears in the news. For each of the past three years he has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. President Obama donated \$100,000 of the award money from his own Nobel Peace Prize, which he received in 2009, to the Central Asia Institute (CAI)—the charity Mortenson launched fifteen years ago to build schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Visiting classrooms wherever he goes, Mortenson has persuaded 2,800 American schools to become fundraising partners; last year, schoolkids collecting “Pennies for Peace” boosted CAI revenues by \$2.5 million. All told, his vigorous promotion of the Greg Mortenson brand generated \$23 million in donations to CAI in 2010 alone.

On March 29 of this year, I attended a lecture Mortenson gave in Cheyenne, Wyoming. As he walked onto the stage in the sold-out arena, more than two thousand men, women, and children leapt to their feet to express their admiration with cheers, whistles, and deafening applause. “If we really want to help people, we have to empower people,” Mortenson pronounced. “And empowering people starts with education.” A book cover depicting Afghan girls engrossed in study was projected onto the screen above the stage. “So I wrote this book called *Three Cups of Tea*,” he deadpanned. “Some of you might have heard about it...”

Laughter rippled through the crowd. Hoping to get an autograph from Mortenson, hundreds of fans were holding copies of his book, which had spent the previous four years and two months on the *New York Times*

paperback nonfiction bestseller list, and showed every sign of remaining there well into the future. Some five million copies are now in print, including special editions for “young readers” and “very young readers” (kindergarten through fourth grade). Moreover, the multitudes who have bought *Three Cups* haven’t merely read it; they’ve embraced it with singular passion. Since its publication in 2006, people galvanized by this autobiographical account of Mortenson’s school-building adventures have donated more than \$50 million to the Central Asia Institute. The book’s popularity stems from its forceful, uncomplicated theme—terrorism can be eradicated by educating children in impoverished societies—and its portrayal of Mortenson as a humble, Gandhi-like figure who has repeatedly risked life and limb to advance his humanitarian agenda.

Told in the third person by Mortenson’s co-author, David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups* begins with Mortenson hiking down Pakistan’s Baltoro Glacier in September 1993, having failed to climb K2, the second-highest peak on earth. A trauma nurse by profession, he’d been invited to join an expedition to K2 to serve as the team medic.¹ After two months of punishing effort, however, Mortenson realized he lacked the strength to reach the summit, so he abandoned his attempt and left the expedition early. Exhausted and dejected, the thirty-five-year-old mountaineer reached into a pocket as he trudged down the trail and “fingered the necklace of amber beads that his little sister Christa had often worn. As a three-year-old in Tanzania, where Mortenson’s Minnesota-born parents had been Lutheran missionaries and teachers, Christa had contracted acute meningitis and never fully recovered. Greg, twelve years her senior, had appointed himself her protector.”

In July 1992, at age twenty-three, Christa had suffered a massive epileptic seizure, apparently stemming from her childhood health problems, and died. Ten months later, Mortenson had trekked into the Karakoram Range with Christa's necklace, intending to leave it on K2's 28,267-foot summit, which is considerably more difficult to reach than the crest of Mount Everest. Now the defeated Mortenson "wiped his eyes with his sleeve, disoriented by the unfamiliar tears.... After seventy-eight days of primal struggle at altitude on K2, he felt like a faint, shriveled caricature of himself." He wasn't even sure he had the strength to make it to Askole, the village at trail's end, fifty miles down the valley.

A week into his homeward trek through Baltistan, as this corner of Pakistan is known, Mortenson became separated from Mouzafer Ali, the Balti porter he had hired to carry his heavy backpack. Without Mouzafer's guidance, Mortenson took a wrong turn and lost his way. A few hours later, he arrived at a village he assumed was Askole. As Mortenson walked into the settlement, a throng of local youngsters, fascinated by the tall foreigner, gathered around him. "By the time he reached the village's ceremonial entrance...he was leading a procession of fifty children."

Just beyond, Mortenson was greeted warmly by "a wizened old man, with features so strong they might have been carved out of the canyon walls." His name was Haji Ali, the village chieftain. He led Mortenson to his stone hut, "placed cushions at the spot of honor closest to the open hearth, and installed Mortenson there.... When Mortenson looked up, he saw the eyes of the fifty children who had followed him," peering down from a large square opening in the roof. "Here, warm by the hearth, on soft

pillows, snug in the crush of so much humanity, he felt the exhaustion he'd been holding at arm's length surge up over him."

At that moment, though, Haji Ali revealed to Mortenson that he wasn't in Askole, as the American believed. Owing to his wrong turn, he'd blundered into a village called Korphe. "Adrenaline snapped Mortenson back upright. He'd never heard of Korphe.... Rousing himself, he explained that he had to get to Askole and meet a man named Mouzafer who was carrying all his belongings. Haji Ali gripped his guest by the shoulders with his powerful hands and pushed him back on the pillows." Surrendering to fatigue, Mortenson closed his eyes and sank into a deep sleep.

In *Three Cups of Tea*, Mortenson never indicates exactly how many days he spent in Korphe on that initial visit in 1993, but he implies it was a lengthy stay:

From his base in Haji Ali's home, Mortenson settled into a routine. Each morning and afternoon he would walk briefly about Korphe, accompanied, as always, by children tugging at his hands.... Off the Baltoro, out of danger, he realized just how precious his own survival had been, and how weakened he'd become. He could barely make it down the switchback path that led to the river.... Wheezing his way back up to the village, he felt as infirm as the elderly men who sat for hours at a time under Korphe's apricot trees, smoking from hookahs and eating apricot kernels. After an hour or two of poking about each day he'd succumb to exhaustion and return to stare at the sky from his nest of pillows by Haji Ali's hearth.

During his protracted recuperation in Korphe, Mortenson became aware of the Baltis' poverty, and "how close they lived to hunger." He noticed the widespread malnutrition and disease, and learned that one out of every three Korphe children perished before their first birthday. "Mortenson couldn't imagine discharging the debt he felt to his hosts in Korphe. But he was determined to try." He gave away most of his possessions, including his camping stove and warm expedition clothing.

Each day, as he grew stronger, he spent long hours climbing the steep paths between Korphe's homes, doing what little he could to beat back the avalanche of need.... He set broken bones and did what little he could with painkillers and antibiotics. Word of his work spread and the sick on the outskirts of Korphe began sending relatives to fetch "Dr. Greg," as he would thereafter be known in northern Pakistan....

Often during his time in Korphe, Mortenson felt the presence of his little sister Christa, especially when he was with Korphe's children.... They reminded [him] of the way Christa had to fight for the simplest things. Also the way she had of just persevering, no matter what life threw at her. He decided he wanted to do something for them.... Lying by the hearth before bed, Mortenson told Haji Ali he wanted to visit Korphe's school.

The following morning, “after their familiar breakfast of *chapattis* and *cha*,”

Haji Ali led Mortenson up a steep path to a vast open ledge.... He was appalled to see eighty-two children, seventy-eight boys and the four girls who had the pluck to join them, kneeling in the frosty ground, in the open. Haji Ali, avoiding Mortenson’s eyes, said that the village had no school, and the Pakistani government didn’t provide a teacher.... Mortenson watched, his heart in his throat, as the students stood at rigid attention and began their ‘school day’ with Pakistan’s national anthem.... After the last note of the anthem had faded, the children sat in a neat circle and began copying their multiplication tables. Most scratched in the dirt with a stick they’d brought for that purpose.

“I felt like my heart was being torn out,” Mortenson declares in this passage. “There was a fierceness in their desire to learn, despite how mightily everything was stacked against them, that reminded me of Christa. I knew I had to do something.” As Mortenson stood beside Haji Ali that crisp autumn morning, gazing up at the towering peaks of the Karakoram,

climbing K2 to place a necklace on its summit suddenly felt beside the point. There was a much more meaningful gesture he could make in honor of his sister’s memory. He put his hands on Haji Ali’s shoulders, as the old man had done to him dozens of times

since they'd shared their first cup of tea. "I'm going to build you a school," he said, not yet realizing that with those words, the path of his life had just detoured down another trail, a route far more serpentine and arduous than the wrong turns he'd taken since retreating from K2. "I *will* build a school," Mortenson said. "I promise."

This, in Mortenson's dramatic telling, is how he came to dedicate his life to building schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He devotes nearly a third of the book to this transformative experience, which he says occurred in September 1993. It's a compelling creation myth, one that he has repeated in thousands of public appearances and media interviews. The problem is, it's precisely that: a myth.

Mortenson didn't really stumble into Korphe after taking a wrong turn on his way down from K2. He wasn't lovingly nursed back to health in the home of Haji Ali. He set no villagers' broken bones. On that crisp September morning, shortly before returning to America, Mortenson did not put his hands on Haji Ali's shoulders and promise to build a school. In fact, Mortenson would not even make the acquaintance of Haji Ali, or anyone else in Korphe, until more than a year later, in October 1994, under entirely different circumstances.

The first eight chapters of *Three Cups of Tea* are an intricately wrought work of fiction presented as fact. And by no means was this an isolated act of deceit. It turns out that Mortenson's books and public statements are permeated with falsehoods. The image of Mortenson that has been created

for public consumption is an artifact born of fantasy, audacity, and an apparently insatiable hunger for esteem. Mortenson has lied about the noble deeds he has done, the risks he has taken, the people he has met, the number of schools he has built. *Three Cups of Tea* has much in common with *A Million Little Pieces*, the infamous autobiography by James Frey that was exposed as a sham. But Frey, unlike Mortenson, didn't use his phony memoir to solicit tens of millions of dollars in donations from unsuspecting readers, myself among them. Moreover, Mortenson's charity, the Central Asia Institute, has issued fraudulent financial statements, and he has misused millions of dollars donated by schoolchildren and other trusting devotees. "Greg," says a former treasurer of the organization's board of directors, "regards CAI as his personal ATM."



THIS IS WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED after Mortenson abandoned his attempt on K2. He trekked down from the mountain in the company of three companions: his American friend and climbing partner Scott Darsney; his Balti porter, Mouzafer; and Darsney's porter, Yakub. According to each of these companions, the four men walked together into Askole, whereupon they immediately hired a jeep to take them to the city of Skardu, the district capital. When they drove out of the mountains, Darsney assured me, Mortenson "didn't know Korphe existed."

Upon their arrival in Skardu, Mouzafer and Yakub quickly departed for their village in the Hushe Valley, a twelve-hour drive to the east, while

Mortenson and Darsney stayed in Skardu. They booked a room at the K2 Motel, a comfortable lodge renowned among Western climbers and trekkers for its hospitality and excellent food. After relaxing there for the better part of a week to recuperate from their debilitating expedition, according to Darsney, he and Mortenson hired a jeep to take them to the village of Khane in the Hushe Valley, the home of their expedition cook, Akhmalu, who had become a friend during the months they'd spent together on K2. The two Americans stayed in Khane for several days as Akhmalu's guest, and Mortenson developed great affection for the residents of the village. When Mortenson learned they had no school, he promised Akhmalu he would return to Khane the following year and build one. Then Mortenson and Darsney departed for Islamabad (via a leisurely sightseeing detour that included Peshawar and the Khyber Pass) to catch a flight home.

Back in the States, Mortenson lived in the San Francisco Bay Area and supported himself as a nurse. In his spare time, he tried to raise money for what he'd christened the Khane School Project. Erica Stone, the director of the American Himalayan Foundation (AHF), remembers "when Greg appeared at my AHF door one day after his K2 expedition and wanted kind of vaguely to do something good." Stone mentored him, encouraged him, and steered him toward potential donors. "I jokingly called him my science experiment," she says, "because he was around so much."

After nearly a year of fundraising, Mortenson had little to show for his efforts until the summer of 1994, when Stone included a short article by Mortenson in the American Himalayan Foundation newsletter. "I came to Hushe as part of an expedition to K2 in 1993," he wrote.

After seventy days on the mountain, I spent some time in Khane. When I asked to see the school, the villagers took me up to a dusty apricot grove on a hill behind the village. A group of 85 children, five to twelve years old, were sitting in the dirt, reciting spelling tables.... Despite abject poverty, their spirits soared. It was obvious that these children were intensely loved by their community, that their well-being was a top priority. But the village simply had no money for education or health care.... So I made the commitment to help realize a school and clinic in Khane.

I started this project because I care deeply about these people. Two years ago, my youngest sister Christa died suddenly after a valiant 23-year struggle with epilepsy. During her short life, her joyful spirit touched many people, especially me. The Khane School Project is my way of honoring her. If you'd like to be part of this project, please give us a call.

Upon reading the article, a wealthy AHF supporter named Jean Hoerni gave Mortenson \$12,000—enough, by Greg's estimation, to build a simple five-room school building in Khane. In October 1994, Mortenson flew to Pakistan, purchased \$8,000 worth of lumber and cement in Rawalpindi, and then hired a garishly decorated “jingle” truck to transport everything up the Karakoram Highway to Skardu. There, the building materials were unloaded at a compound owned by Mohammed Ali Changazi, the tour operator and trekking agent who had managed the logistics for Mortenson's

K2 expedition the previous year. When Mortenson arrived in Skardu in 1994, he intended to build the school in Khane village, as he'd pledged to Akhmalu in 1993. But Mortenson had discussed his plans with Changazi, who tipped off the chieftain of a village called Korphe—a Balti elder named Haji Ali—who had legally adopted Changazi as a boy.

When he learned from his adopted son that a starry-eyed American was coming to build a school, Haji Ali resolved to get the school built in *his* village, Korphe, rather than Akhmalu's village. Only Mortenson and Changazi know exactly what happened next—Haji Ali died in 2001—but a few days after the truckload of construction materials was stacked in Changazi's compound, Changazi introduced Mortenson to Haji Ali. Shortly thereafter, Mortenson reneged on his pledge to build the school in Khane and announced that he intended to build it in Korphe instead.

All of this diverges in irreconcilable ways from the heartwarming tale recounted in the first hundred pages of *Three Cups of Tea*. A passage on page 97, for example, describes Mortenson's triumphant "return" to Korphe in 1994, in which Mortenson, looking Haji Ali in the eye, declares, "I came back to keep my promise."² In fact, Mortenson had never set foot in Korphe until that moment, and rather than keeping a promise, he was breaking the vow he had made to Khane. On page 89, Mortenson adds insult to this injury when he chastises the Khane villagers, "I never made any promise," accusing them of being greedy shysters for trying to hold him to the pledge he'd made in his sister's name—a commitment memorialized in the article he'd written a few months previously.



IN SEPTEMBER 1995, Greg met a lovely, outgoing woman named Tara Bishop, with whom he felt a rare and immediate attachment. Six days later they married. Construction of the Korphe school began in May 1996, under Mortenson's watchful eye. At the beginning of July, when the school walls were standing but the roof framing was not yet complete, Mortenson departed Korphe to spend time with Tara, who had remained in the United States and was seven months pregnant with their first child. Upon flying from Skardu to Islamabad, though, Mortenson impulsively decided to postpone the next leg of his journey home after a chance encounter with a convivial Pashtun named Naimat Gul Mahsud.

Naimat Gul remembers meeting Mortenson outside the latter's hotel in the city of Rawalpindi, a couple of miles from the Islamabad airport: "It was just after dawn. There were light rain showers, and a cool breeze was blowing.... I saw a person making videos, and he suddenly turned his face towards me and waved his hand." A friendly conversation ensued. When Naimat Gul proudly explained that he was a member of the indomitable Mahsud tribe, and hailed from South Waziristan Agency, a region strictly off-limits to foreigners, Mortenson's "face filled with curiousness," Naimat Gul recalls, "and he said he was anxious to visit. He asked me if this was possible. I said, 'Yes, why not? You may go with me if you are seriously intended.'... I briefed him that he would be bound not to tell any government official," lest Mortenson be arrested for illegally entering the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA.

Naimat Gul later sent me a handwritten card from Mortenson confirming their plan to embark on the long drive to Naimat Gul's ancestral homeland on July 13, 1996, in a Toyota Corolla that Naimat Gul had rented. After spending their first night together in Peshawar, Mortenson and Naimat Gul hit the road again early on July 14, crossing the border into the forbidden tribal areas at midday. As they continued driving west and then south, the flat, barren earth rose into a labyrinth of high ridges bristling with thorn-studded oaks. It was a rugged landscape, but a lovely one—somewhat reminiscent of the country around Bozeman, Montana, where four months earlier Greg and Tara had moved to raise a family. Late in the afternoon, Mortenson and Naimat Gul passed from North Waziristan into South Waziristan, and as the sun went down they arrived in Tehsil Ladha, Naimat Gul's home turf (a *tehsil* is a Pakistani administrative division roughly analogous to an American county).

Little did Naimat Gul know, when he offered to take Mortenson to his village and serve as his host and guardian there, that his amiable guest would one day write a book in which their pleasant sojourn would be transformed into an elaborate tale of abduction and intimidation at the hands of murderous *jihadis*—an account that fills an entire chapter of *Three Cups of Tea* (pages 154-173) and that Mortenson has repeated in hundreds of media interviews.

In most of these interviews, Mortenson has distilled the story into an attention-grabbing sound bite. During an appearance on *CBS Evening News* on October 23, 2008, for example, he said of the experience, “I was kidnapped for eight days in Waziristan by the Taliban.” In a two-minute

promotional video posted on the website of his book publisher, Penguin, Mortenson was slightly more loquacious: “I got kidnapped by the Taliban for eight days.... It was quite a frightening experience. The first three days, all I could think about is they might take me outside at any moment and finish me off.”

In *Three Cups of Tea*, however, where he had room to get creative, Mortenson spun a long, fantastical yarn festooned with enthralling details. In this account, Mortenson first encountered Naimat Gul Mahsud in the treacherous city of Peshawar rather than Rawalpindi (where the two men actually met), and Naimat Gul’s name was changed to “Mr. Khan.” Just before sunset, they arrived in Ladha, South Waziristan, and “Khan” parked his gray Toyota inside a warehouse for the night.

The scene inside the warehouse set Mortenson immediately on edge. Six Wazir men with bandoliers criss-crossed on their chests slumped on packing crates smoking hashish from a multinecked hookah. Piled against the walls, Mortenson saw stacks of bazookas, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and crates of oily new AK-47s....

Khan and the elder of the gang, a tall man with rose-colored aviator glasses and a thick black mustache that perched, batlike, on his upper lip, talked heatedly in Pashto about what to do with the outsider for the evening. After they’d finished, [Khan] took a long draw from the hookah and turned to Mortenson. “Haji Mirza please

to invite you to his house,” he said, smoke dribbling through his teeth.

The fictional Haji Mirza, the fellow with the batlike mustache, lived in a hilltop compound where a “gun tower rose fifty feet above the courtyard so snipers could pick off anyone approaching uninvited.” After a meal of roast lamb, during which the Wazir tribesmen “attacked it with their long daggers, stripping tender meat from the bone and cramming it into their mouths with the blades of their knives,” Mortenson fell asleep on the floor of the compound. Two hours later he was rudely awakened by someone dangling a kerosene lantern in front of his face,

sending shadows lurching grotesquely up the walls. Behind the lamp, Mortenson saw the barrel of an AK-47 aimed, he realized, his consciousness ratcheting up a notch with this information, at his chest. Behind the gun, a wild man with a matted beard and gray turban was shouting in a language he didn’t understand.

Mortenson was jerked to his feet and dragged out the door, where he was blindfolded, thrown in the bed of a pickup truck, and driven to another location. There, he was locked inside a “spare, high-ceilinged room” with a “single small window, shuttered from outside,” and guarded by two thugs with AK-47s. In the morning, when Mortenson indicated he needed to visit a toilet, his abductors escorted him to a crude stall with a squat latrine, where one of the guards “walked inside with him while the other stared in

from outside.” Mortenson explained, “To have to, you know, clean yourself afterward while they stare at you, was nerve-wracking.”

According to Mortenson, he was imprisoned for eight days, with nothing to read but “a tattered *Time* magazine dated November 1979.” By the middle of his fifth night in captivity,

Mortenson felt a wave of blackness lapping at his feet, surging up to his knees, threatening to drown him in despair.... Through force of will, Mortenson held the black water at bay, and turned the pages of the magazine, searching for a foothold in the warm dry world he’d left behind. Dawn of his sixth morning in captivity found Mortenson’s eyes tearing up over an ad for a WaterPik Oral Hygiene Appliance.

By and by, the ringleader who ordered his abduction showed up, a man described by Mortenson as “an emerging Taliban commander” who spoke perfect English. Mortenson told the commander he ran a charity that was building a school in Baltistan, and “planned to build many more schools for Pakistan’s most neglected children,” hoping his good intentions would convince the Talib to release him, but the gambit failed. So Mortenson tried a different tack, telling the commander that his wife was about to give birth to their first child, a son (even though Mortenson had already learned that the baby would be a daughter), because he “knew that for a Muslim the birth of a son is a really big deal.... I felt bad about lying, but I thought the birth of a son might make them let me go.”

This ploy, alas, also failed to win his freedom. At 4:00 in the morning of the ninth day, when the commander blindfolded Mortenson and put him in the bed of a pickup truck full of armed men, Mortenson assumed his execution was imminent:

Back then, before 9/11, beheading foreigners wasn't in fashion.... And I didn't think being shot was such a bad way to die. But the idea that Tara would have to raise our child on her own and would probably never find out what happened to me made me crazy. I could picture her pain and uncertainty going on and on and that seemed like the most horrible thing of all.

Fortunately, as Mortenson was taking what he feared were his final breaths, the truck skidded to a stop, whereupon the commander removed Mortenson's blindfold and gave him a hug. "We're throwing a party," the Talib announced. "A party before we take you back to Peshawar." Instead of being executed by a Taliban firing squad, Mortenson was feted as the guest of honor at a rowdy Pashtun hoedown featuring barbecued goat, lots of hashish, and boisterous dancing. Throughout the bacchanal, dozens of Taliban embraced Mortenson like a long-lost brother and stuffed wads of hundred-rupee notes into his pockets. "For your schools!" the commander explained, shouting in Mortenson's ear to be heard over bursts of celebratory gunfire. "So, *Inshallah*, you'll build many more!"

Giddily [Mortenson] joined the celebration, goat grease trickling down his eight-day beard, performing the old Tanzanian steps he thought he'd forgotten to shouts of encouragement from the Wazir, dancing with the absolute bliss, with the wild abandon, bequeathed by freedom.

If this stirring resolution to Mortenson's ordeal seems a bit far-fetched, it is. The entire story was fabricated. There was no wild party, no Taliban commander, no abduction of any sort. According to Mansur Khan Mahsud, a Pakistani scholar who frequently accompanied Mortenson during his visit to Tehsil Ladha, Mortenson was never threatened, no one ever pointed a gun at him, and no one ever held him against his will, even momentarily, during the approximately fifteen days he spent in South Waziristan. "Greg was never worried or frightened," says Mansur Khan, now the director of Research and Administration at the FATA Research Centre, an internationally respected, nonpartisan think tank in Islamabad. "No, no, no. He really enjoyed his stay there. And he was given very good treatment. If he tells, 'I have been kidnapped,' he is lying. He was an honored guest of the whole village."

During Mortenson's visit to Ladha, he was housed in a village called Kot Langerkhel, at the home of the deputy inspector general of the police. A photograph shows Mortenson relaxing in this home, which had comfortable furniture and was connected to the national electrical grid. According to Mortenson, he was abducted in the middle of his first night in South Waziristan, and spent every night thereafter in captivity sleeping on

an earthen floor “under a musty blanket.” But the photo shows Mortenson smiling broadly as he sits on the deputy inspector general’s Western-style bed, replete with a mattress and clean linens.

In another photograph, Mortenson is strolling across a field above Kot Langerkhel on a lovely July afternoon, accompanied by Naimat Gul Mahsud, Naimat Gul’s young nephew, and his servant. A handwritten note from Sangi Marjan, the commissioner of education, attests to a pleasant visit with Mortenson during the period Mortenson claims to have been held captive. According to Mansur Khan, Mortenson was introduced to everyone he met as “a professor at an American medical college.” Villagers came from throughout Ladha to receive treatment from him, and he became quite a popular figure.

It is nearly impossible to overstate the importance of personal reputation to Pashtuns in general, and members of the Mahsud tribe in particular. Upholding one’s honor, and the honor of one’s clan, is the preeminent tenet of *Pashtunwali*, the overarching moral code that has shaped Mahsud culture and identity for centuries. By offering to act as Mortenson’s host and guardian in South Waziristan, Naimat Gul obligated his branch of the Mahsud tribe to protect Mortenson from physical injury and personal affront. The village of Kot Langerkhel took this responsibility quite seriously. Mahsud tribesmen, armed with Kalashnikov automatic rifles, volunteered to accompany Mortenson whenever he traveled beyond the center of the village. “I myself accompanied Greg two or three times during his visit to different areas in South Waziristan Agency,” says Mansur Khan, who was twenty-five years old at the time.

In *Stones into Schools*—Mortenson’s second book, published in 2009—there is a color photograph of thirteen men holding Kalashnikovs. The caption identifies them as “Waziri tribesmen who abducted Greg Mortenson near Razmak, North Waziristan. Greg was detained there for eight days in July 1996.” But according to Mansur Khan, who is one of the individuals depicted, all the men in the photo are members of the Mahsud tribe, not Wazirs (who are sworn enemies of the Mahsuds), and they were Mortenson’s guardians, not his abductors. “This picture was taken in Ladha, not in Razmak, North Waziristan Agency,” Mansur Khan scoffs. “This was a leisure trip to show Greg different places in Ladha.” Unpublished photographs taken at the same time and place, date-stamped “7-21-96,” show Mortenson clutching an AK-47 and wearing a rack of ammunition across his chest, hamming it up beside Mansur Khan and other Mahsud tribesmen who volunteered to serve as Mortenson’s bodyguards—most of whom appear in the *Stones into Schools* photo as well.

A preponderance of evidence indicates that Mortenson manufactured his account of being kidnapped by the Taliban out of whole cloth, apparently for the same reason he’s invented so many other anecdotes of personal derring-do in his books and public appearances: to inflate the myth of Greg Mortenson, “the astonishing, uplifting story of a real-life Indiana Jones and his remarkable humanitarian campaign in the Taliban’s backyard,” as the back cover of *Three Cups of Tea* puts it. The likelihood that anyone in the United States would ever discover the truth about what happened in an exceedingly isolated Pakistani village must have seemed infinitesimal to Mortenson.

The truth, says Mansur Khan Mahsud, is that “in 1996 there were no Taliban operating anywhere near Ladha. The Taliban didn’t come until 2001.” Although a ruthless faction known as the Tehrik-i-Taliban now holds sway over much of South Waziristan, Mansur Khan points out that it was only after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, post-9/11, that large numbers of Taliban fled across the Durand Line into the tribal areas of Pakistan, seeking refuge from American drones and bombers.

The fact is, almost every person Mortenson encountered during his visit to Ladha treated him graciously. Only once was Mortenson made to feel less than completely welcome: Near the end of July, the South Waziristan Political Agent heard that a foreigner was vacationing in Kot Langerkhel, prompting government authorities to ask Naimat Gul Mahsud to escort Mortenson out of the banned tribal areas as soon as possible. A few days later, Naimat Gul drove Mortenson to Peshawar International Airport and put him on a plane for Islamabad.

When the residents of Ladha bid goodbye to Mortenson, they did so with affection, and they believed the feeling was mutual. “Years later,” says Naimat Gul, “when I scanned through the book *Three Cups of Tea* and read that Greg had been abducted and threatened with guns, I was shocked. Instead of telling the world about our frustration, deprivation, illiteracy, and tradition of hospitality, he invented a false story about being abducted by savages. I do not understand why he did this.”³



Greg Mortenson (standing, center, holding an AK-47 rifle) with some of the men he would falsely accuse of having kidnapped him for eight days in July 1996. Mansur Khan Mahsud is on the far right.

Photograph Courtesy of: Naimut Gul Mahsud



"Instead of telling the world about our frustration, deprivation, illiteracy, and tradition of hospitality," says Naimut Gul Mahsud (with Mortenson en route to the alleged kidnapping in 1996), "he invented a false story...."

Photograph Courtesy of: Naimut Gul Mahsud

Part II

ACCOUNTABLE TO NO ONE

“[T]he duties of speaking, promoting, and fundraising into which I have been thrust...have often made me feel like a man caught in the act of conducting an illicit affair with the dark side of his own personality.”

—Greg Mortenson, *Stones into Schools*

IN THE FALL 1993, when Mortenson arrived home from K2, he immediately started soliciting donations for his “Khane school project.” A year later, he had managed to raise just \$723. “If it hadn’t been for Jean,” muses Jennifer Wilson, referring to Jean Hoerni, her late husband, “Greg would still be a nurse.” In September 1994, Hoerni gave Mortenson the \$12,000 he needed to build his first school, thereby launching his career as a humanitarian. Hoerni was a brilliant theoretical physicist who in the late 1950s played a pivotal role in the invention of the planar transistor, a new type of semiconductor that enabled the mass production of silicon chips—thereby transforming not only the electronics industry but also life as we know it. According to Stanford University historian Michael Riordan, “Hoerni’s elegant idea helped to establish Silicon Valley as the microelectronics epicenter of the world.” It also made Hoerni a wealthy man.

Hoerni had moved to California in 1952 at the age of twenty-eight, but he was born and raised in Switzerland, where he had developed a lifelong passion for mountains and mountaineering. Around 1990, Hoerni met Jennifer Wilson, their friendship gradually evolved into something more serious, and in the summer of 1993 he invited her on a twenty-eight-day, two-hundred-mile trek through the Himalaya, in the northern Indian regions of Zaskar and Ladakh. “I had never even been camping before,” says Wilson, a businesswoman who grew up in Iowa. “It was a completely new experience for me. It was amazing.” Four months after returning from

India, Wilson and Hoerni got married. He was sixty-nine; she was forty-five.

In the fall of 1994, Hoerni happened to read Mortenson's article in the American Himalayan Foundation newsletter about his quixotic scheme to build a school in Baltistan. Having trekked up the Baltoro Glacier to K2 on two occasions, Hoerni was familiar with the region, and the venture piqued his imagination. "I was in the kitchen," Wilson remembers. "Jean came in and said, 'Look at this article about this guy who is trying to build a school. Americans don't care about Muslims; they only care about Buddhist Sherpas in Nepal. No one is going to contribute to this. I'm going to call this guy.'" Hoerni, who was living in Seattle, had a brief phone conversation with Mortenson, and then wrote him a \$12,000 check. After the call, Wilson recalls, "Jean actually said, 'This guy may just take off with my money. But I'm going to take a chance on him.' It was really an act of faith." As soon as the check cleared the bank, Mortenson departed for Pakistan to build his first school.

In December 1996, when Mortenson reported to Hoerni that the school was finally finished, Hoerni didn't care that it had been built in Korphe instead of Khane; he was simply happy that it had been completed while he was still around to hear about it. Eighteen months earlier, he and Wilson had been hiking up a mountain in the Swiss Jura, Wilson says, "and Jean couldn't keep up with me. That was unprecedented." Although Hoerni was seventy at the time, up until that moment he had been as strong as a man many years his junior; the previous summer he had trekked over an 18,400-foot Tibetan pass at a blistering pace. Concerned about his persistent,

uncharacteristic fatigue, Wilson persuaded Hoerni to make an appointment to see his brother, Marc, who was a doctor in Geneva. A blood test revealed that Jean had acute leukemia. He was expected to die within a few months.

Nevertheless, for about a year after his diagnosis, Hoerni managed to remain active. “We weren’t able to hike as vigorously,” says Wilson, “but he was still able to hike. The doctors were kind of astonished.” In July 1996, however, while Mortenson was sojourning in South Waziristan, Hoerni underwent emergency surgery to remove his spleen. He nearly died on the operating table. Upon his release from the hospital, his skin remained ashen and he grew increasingly frail.

Back in 1995, nearly a year after Hoerni had given Mortenson the \$12,000 he needed to start working in Pakistan, he paid for Mortenson to fly to Seattle so they could meet face to face. “They bonded immediately,” says Wilson. Hoerni admired Mortenson’s chutzpa, his willingness to think big. Both men loved the mountains. Both were visionaries, rule breakers, and risk takers—perennial outsiders who had scant regard for societal conventions.

Hoerni treated Mortenson like a son, and his affection was reciprocated, according to Wilson: “Greg told me that Jean became kind of a father figure to him, perhaps because his own father had died.” In the wake of their Seattle rendezvous, Hoerni was so enamored of Mortenson and his humanitarian goals that he gave him \$250,000 to build five more schools in Pakistan, even though the Korphe project had barely gotten off the ground. In order to make this donation tax-deductible, Hoerni channeled it to Mortenson through a special account at the American Himalayan

Foundation, designated the Hoerni/Pakistan Fund. Then, just a year later in the autumn of 1996, when it became obvious to Hoerni that his death was imminent, he established a stand-alone, tax-exempt charity for Mortenson, endowing it with an additional million dollars. Thus did the Central Asia Institute come into existence.

As 1996 drew to a close and Hoerni's decline accelerated, Mortenson flew to Seattle to spend a few days with his benefactor before the end. During this farewell visit, Mortenson made good use of his nursing skills to make Hoerni as comfortable as possible, and Hoerni seemed grateful for his presence. On January 12, 1997, not long after Mortenson returned to Montana, Jean Hoerni died, with his wife and daughters at his bedside.



ONE OF MORTENSON'S childhood heroes was Mother Teresa. According to *Three Cups of Tea* (page 236), Mortenson “admired her determination to serve the world’s most neglected populations.” A hospice for the terminally ill that she opened in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1968 captured Greg’s imagination as a ten-year-old growing up in the village of Moshi, 275 miles to the north, and his respect for Mother Teresa became greater still when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Mortenson came to regard her as a role model, even after she faced withering criticism over the shoddy medical care her hospices provided and for lying to donors about how their contributions were used. According to *Three Cups*,

Mortenson had heard the criticism of the woman.... He'd read her defense of her practice of taking donations from unsavory sources, like drug dealers, corporate criminals, and corrupt politicians hoping to purchase their own path to salvation. After his own struggle to raise funds for the children of Pakistan, he felt he understood what had driven her to famously dismiss her critics by saying, "I don't care where the money comes from. It's all washed clean in the service of God."

Mortenson's 1993 trip to K2 had ignited in him a powerful ambition to improve the lives of villagers in the mountains of northeastern Pakistan, an ambition inspired in part by Mother Teresa.⁴ Hoerni's generosity granted Mortenson an extraordinary opportunity to realize this dream. By the end of 2000, he had built more than twenty schools, with dozens more in the pipeline, an impressive feat by any measure. "We can construct and maintain a school for a generation that will educate thousands of children for less than \$20,000," he asserted in interviews and public presentations. But in truth, CAI was spending \$50,000 or more—sometimes a lot more—just to build a single school, and the funds coming in were significantly less than the funds going out. Four years after Hoerni's death, Mortenson had already burned through most of Hoerni's money, and CAI teetered on the brink of insolvency.

"Greg had no sense of what it takes to run a business," says Jennifer Wilson, who joined CAI's board of directors shortly after Hoerni passed away. "Jean was able to make Greg do things and hold him accountable, but

after Jean was gone, Greg wouldn't answer to anyone.... Tom Vaughan was a sweetheart, but Greg could always find his way around him."

Vaughan, a genial San Francisco pulmonologist and mountaineer who died in 2009, served as chairman of the CAI board. "Even when he was home, we often wouldn't hear from Greg for weeks," Vaughan laments in *Three Cups*, in one of the rare criticisms of Mortenson that appears in the book. "And he wouldn't return phone calls or emails. The board had a discussion about trying to make Greg account for how he spent his time, but we realized that would never work. Greg just does whatever he wants." Most of the directors, like Vaughan, were frustrated by Mortenson's passive-aggressive disposition, and his disdain for routine business practices.

In late 1999, with Mortenson's encouragement, Tom Hornbein had been asked to join CAI's board to boost fundraising and provide the organization with some badly needed discipline. Thirty-six years earlier, Hornbein had made the first ascent of the formidable West Ridge of Mount Everest, still widely considered one of the greatest accomplishments in mountaineering history. President John F. Kennedy awarded the Hubbard Medal to Hornbein and his Everest teammates (one of whom was Mortenson's future father-in-law, Barry Bishop). In a distinguished career after Everest, Hornbein served as chairman of the anesthesiology department at the University of Washington School of Medicine, where he earned a reputation as a demanding but compassionate *jefe*.

"Tom Hornbein was really fun to work with," Jennifer Wilson remembers of their years together on the CAI board. "He and I agreed on so

many levels, especially about the need to hold Greg accountable and somehow get him to be more businesslike.”

But the harder Hornbein, Wilson, and other CAI directors tried to persuade Mortenson to heed their edicts about providing receipts, documenting expenses, and conforming to IRS regulations, the more intransigent he became. By 2001, when Hornbein succeeded Tom Vaughan as chairman of the CAI board, relations between Mortenson and the rest of the board were nearing the flash point. In an email to Mortenson dated September 20, 2001, Hornbein warned,

I write to share with you my continuing concerns about our relationship in our roles as Director and Board chair.... The underlying issues are ones of communication between the two of us, and trust.... Whatever the stigma, if you and I are not able to work out a more facile, productive communication, I doubt my ability to fulfill my responsibility to you and the CAI Board.... We exist, whether you consider us a pain-in-the-ass at times or not. Unless you would wish to and are capable of being a one man show (as it was in the beginning), then you are stuck with and need us.

When he sent this email, Hornbein was feverishly organizing a major fundraiser for CAI, to be held twelve days hence at Seattle’s Town Hall, and he asked me to serve as Mortenson’s opening act. I’d met Greg four or five times by then, and I was enormously impressed by what he’d done in Pakistan. When Greg explained to me that it had all begun with a promise

he'd made to the people of Korphe in 1993, after he'd accidentally wandered into their village and they'd nursed him back to health, I was profoundly moved. Over the previous three years I'd donated more than \$55,000 to CAI, and I'd committed to donating another \$20,000 in 2002. I told Hornbein I would be honored to introduce Greg at the fundraiser.

The event did not begin well. Mortenson arrived an hour late. When Hornbein admonished him for keeping the packed house waiting, Greg sulked and threatened to fly home without speaking. Only after much inveigling did Greg eventually consent to go on stage. When things finally got under way, I concluded my introduction by telling the audience, "What Greg has accomplished, with very little money, verges on the miraculous." As he shambled up to the podium and gave me a hug, the auditorium filled with thunderous applause. Greg's presentation knocked the crowd's socks off, and the fundraiser turned out to be a notable success.

Relations between Mortenson and the CAI board, however, continued to deteriorate. "I would talk to people who expressed interest in making a sizable contribution," says Jennifer Wilson, "but when they tried to contact Greg he wouldn't get back to them. Other people who actually made big contributions never got follow-ups from Greg. We kept trying to persuade Greg to hire an administrator who would do all the stuff he wasn't good at, but he refused.... At the time, I didn't understand. Now that I know about the things he was hiding, I realize he didn't want anyone looking over his shoulder. That would have been tremendously threatening to him."

By early 2002, Mortenson pretty much stopped communicating with the board altogether. Exasperated, Wilson quit. At the conclusion of a

contentious board meeting on September 7, 2002, Hornbein and two other hard-working directors, Gordon Wiltsie and Sally Uhlmann, left the board as well. In a letter to the other directors explaining his resignation, Hornbein wrote,

I am devastated by what has happened.... While my belief in CAI's mission is undiminished, I can no longer believe that Greg, in spite of his unswerving commitment, has the attributes demanded to lead CAI into its next phase.... Communication is essential to trust. Accountability with transparency underpins trust.... Many of the Board's efforts to achieve this accountability have been thwarted by Greg, simply by his not responding. It was Greg's vision and courage that created CAI and caused us to commit our energies. He is a unique individual with many precious attributes. Now, sadly, it is other aspects of Greg, ones I don't understand, that leave me doubting the future viability of his dream.

For his part, Mortenson was elated by the departure of Wilson, Hornbein, Wiltsie, and Uhlmann, and simply swept the issues they'd raised under the rug. His stonewalling had achieved its desired end, leaving him essentially unaccountable to anyone. In an email to CAI board members and staffers, Mortenson disingenuously gushed,

I want to express my personal gratitude and thanks to Tom Hornbein, Sally and Gordon for their tremendous effort as Board

Directors. Your assistance was a catalyst at a crucial time in CAI's evolution. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. I would also like to extend a belated thanks to Jennifer Wilson for your many years of support that provided continuity and stability from the inception of our efforts.... Despite unrest and uncertainty, this past year has been CAI's most successful year ever in Pakistan.... Onward ho.

Despite this public effusion of gratitude, in private Mortenson told anyone who would listen that Hornbein's criticisms of him were motivated by self-regard and envy. Hornbein, Greg explained, simply wanted to take control of CAI in order to create a legacy for himself. Other board members who witnessed Hornbein and Mortenson interacting during this period have dismissed Mortenson's interpretation as preposterous.

Dealing with Mortenson's idiosyncrasies was stressful for the entire board. Nonetheless, Jennifer Wilson insists, "No matter how many problems I had working with Greg, I never, ever thought of him as evil. And believe me, I've had opportunities where I could have felt that way." It's hard for her to be angry with Mortenson, she says, because "he isn't a normal person. It's almost like he's from another planet.... For years, he struggled to find a place in our Western culture. Then, thanks to Jean's money, Greg figured out how to be extraordinarily successful working in a very different culture." She believes it would be an exercise in futility to expect Mortenson ever to conform to Western norms of doing business—or anything else.



MORTENSON’S BULLISH PRONOUNCEMENT to the CAI board notwithstanding, at the end of 2002 “the organization’s finances were as shaky as ever,” *Three Cups of Tea* reports on page 295. “So Mortenson decided to defer the raise the board had approved for him, from twenty-eight thousand dollars to thirty-five thousand dollars a year.”

Although the first statement (about CAI’s shaky finances) is true, the latter statement is not. According to CAI financial records, Mortenson’s CAI salary for 2002 was \$41,200, plus \$12,087 in employee benefits and deferred compensation; in 2003 his salary increased to \$47,197, plus \$6,547 in benefits. Furthermore, since 1995, he had been quietly drawing a stipend amounting to \$21,792 per year from the AHF Hoerni/Pakistan Fund in addition to his CAI salary package.⁵ All told, at the time Mortenson claimed he was being paid \$28,000, his annual compensation actually exceeded \$75,000. One could make a strong case that Mortenson deserved every penny of it, given how hard he worked and what a crucial role he played in all aspects of CAI’s operation. What’s disturbing is not the amount Mortenson was paid, but that he lied about it—and that dozens of such falsehoods are strewn throughout the book.

In any case, by the fall of 2003, CAI’s financial difficulties had ended. On April 6 of that year, Mortenson appeared on the cover of *Parade* magazine. Inside, an article titled “He Fights Terror With Books” described how Greg found himself in Korphe after retreating from K2 in 1993. After the Korphe villagers nursed him back to health, Mortenson repaid their

kindness by building them a school, and in the years that followed he constructed dozens of other schools in northern Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan. These schools, the article explained, helped to counter the influence of fundamentalist *madrassas*:

“In the past 10 years,” says Mortenson, “more than 80,000 Pakistani and Afghani boys who received hard-line religious instruction in these *madrassas* were fed directly into the ranks of the Taliban. Islamic extremists know they can use these religious schools as an effective vehicle for recruiting terrorists. The West has so far failed to recognize that offering an alternative by building secular schools is the cheapest and most effective way of combating terrorism.”

Thirty-four million copies of the magazine were distributed across the country. The article included a mailing address, an email address, and a toll-free number for Central Asia Institute. Before publication, Mortenson had hired extra staff and set up a phone bank to answer calls to handle the anticipated response. Within a few days, says one of those new employees, “We needed a wheelbarrow for all the mailbags stuffed with checks arriving at the office.” By the end of 2003, the organization had received more than a million dollars in donations. The CAI board of directors (which by then consisted of Mortenson and three loyal admirers) raised Mortenson’s annual salary to \$112,000, and Mortenson announced an ambitious plan to use the *Parade* donations to expand CAI’s programs in Afghanistan.

In the autumn of 2003, Mortenson flew to Afghanistan with funds to construct half a dozen schools in the least-developed corner of that nation, the mysterious Wakhan Corridor. According to *Three Cups of Tea* (pages 314-316), Mortenson enjoyed a long conversation with the king of Afghanistan during this trip, aboard a Pakistan International Airlines flight to Kabul:

The king sat in the window seat. Mortenson recognized him from pictures on the old Afghan currency he'd seen for sale in the bazaars. At eighty-nine, Zahir Shah looked far older than his official portrait as he stared out the window of the PIA 737 at the country he'd been exiled from for nearly thirty years.

Aside from the king's security detail and a small crew of stewardesses, Mortenson was alone on the short flight from Islamabad to Kabul with Afghanistan's former monarch. When Shah turned away from the window, he locked eyes with Mortenson across the aisle.

"*As-Salaam Alaikum*, sir," Mortenson said.

"And to you, sir," Shah replied.

When Mortenson told the king that he was en route to northern Afghanistan's seldom-visited Wakhan region to build schools, Zahir Shah patted the empty seat beside him and invited Greg to sit there. For the remainder of the flight they discussed the remoteness of the Wakhan, the

recent invasion of Iraq, and how the latter was diverting crucial American resources and personnel from Afghanistan.

Zahir Shah placed his hand, with its enormous lapis ring, on Mortenson's. "I'm glad one American is here at least," he said. "The man you want to see up north is Sadhar Khan. He's a *mujahid*. But he cares about his people."

"So I've heard," Mortenson said.

Zahir Shah pulled a calling card out of the breast pocket of the business suit he wore under his striped robe and called for one of his security guards to bring his valise. Then the king held his thumb to an inkpad and pressed his print on the back of the card. "It may be helpful if you give this to *Commandhan* Khan," he said. "Allah be with you. And go with my blessing."

It's a memorable account, layered with vivid particulars. It also happens to be fictitious. His Majesty Zaher Shah died in 2007, but when I contacted a close associate of the king to verify Mortenson's story, he forwarded my query to Mostapha Zaher, the monarch's grandson and successor. Zaher's reply was immediate and unequivocal:

I wish to categorically state, and in no uncertain terms, that my late grandfather had NEVER taken the mentioned flight PIA 737 from Islamabad to Kabul during the Holy Month Ramadhan of 2003. As a matter of fact, he has NEVER traveled on any PIA flights from 1973 to

2007, the year of his passing away [emphasis by Zaher]. The information provided by the person [Mortenson] is simply not factual.



IN THE WAKE of the *Parade* article, as Mortenson's fame continued to grow and the donations kept increasing, his grandiosity and mendacity only became more pronounced. "Greg was horrible to work for," says an ex-employee whom Mortenson hired when the CAI staff expanded to make the most of the *Parade* donations.

"It was very important for him to test people, to test their loyalty," explains another staffer who was brought on around the same time. "He played a lot of mind games. His management style was to divide and conquer. He'd lean forward, tell you how important you were to him, then badmouth other staff so you felt like he was confiding in you. But the staff talked to each other, so we learned he was badmouthing each of us to everyone else. We were all like, 'You're kidding! That's what he told you?'"

"Working for Greg was like being on a roller coaster," this ex-employee continues. "One day he was telling you how great you were, and then for no apparent reason he would give you the icy treatment.... We went through a two- or three-month period where Greg wasn't communicating with the staff at all."

Three Cups of Tea never mentions this aspect of Mortenson's personality, although it frequently refers to his chronic tardiness. David

Relin, Mortenson's co-author, writes in the introduction, "During the two years we worked together on this book, Mortenson was often so maddeningly late for appointments that I considered abandoning the project." On page 39, Mortenson's mother says, "Greg has never been on time in his life.... Ever since he was a boy, Greg has always operated on African time." In 1998, Mortenson showed up three weeks late for a rendezvous in China with his friend Scott Darsney, who was kept waiting in Beijing until Greg finally appeared. Mortenson's aversion to punctuality is presented in *Three Cups* as if it were an endearing quirk. To a number of people who worked with Mortenson over the years, however, his habitual lateness—like his habitual lying—seemed more pathological than quirky.



until recently, I didn't know that the most dramatic anecdotes in *Three Cups of Tea* were fabricated, but by 2004 I had begun to suspect that Mortenson was improperly using CAI funds. After Tom Hornbein, Sally Uhlmann, and Gordon Wiltsie resigned from the CAI board of directors, I asked Wiltsie, who had served as the board treasurer, why he left. "Greg," he replied, "regards CAI as his personal ATM." Wiltsie described how Mortenson would routinely charge personal expenses to CAI, and seldom provided receipts or other documentation for any of his expenditures, no matter how persistently Wiltsie pleaded with him to do so.

At that point, I had donated more than \$75,000 to CAI. On March 23, 2004, I sent a fax to Mortenson's office:

I have decided to suspend my financial support of CAI for the indefinite future. I didn't make this decision lightly. After interviewing several of the people who recently left the board of directors I lost confidence in Greg's accountability. I feel that I cannot continue to give such large sums of money (they seem large to me, at any rate) to an organization run with so little oversight and such lax accounting practices. It is possible that I may decide to support CAI again at some future date. But not until CAI has installed a strong, active board of directors who keep close tabs on how the organization is run. Make no mistake: I still believe in CAI's mission, but I am made extremely uneasy by Greg's way of running the show. Although I don't want to make any public statements that would have a negative impact on Greg's work, I no longer feel comfortable providing financial backing, or lending my name, to CAI.

Debbie Raynor, CAI's chief financial officer at the time, remembers this missive well, because it matched her own experiences with Mortenson so precisely. When my letter rattled out of the CAI fax machine, she had been trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade Mortenson to document his expenses for the previous eight months. She had come on board as CFO in July 2003, and her duties soon expanded to include staff supervisor and board treasurer. By the summer of 2004, however, Mortenson's conduct made it

impossible for Raynor to continue working for CAI in good conscience. As she explained in a memo to the CAI board of directors,

there were no meaningful financial policies or procedures in place when I started my employment. I endeavored to rectify that situation and bring about necessary and much needed financial controls.... These new policies were fully discussed and implemented with full approval by Mr. Mortenson. The staff readily complied with these new policies ensuring an accurate account of expenses. However, Mr. Mortenson has failed to comply in any meaningful manner with these policies.... Since the start of my employment, Mr. Mortenson has spent over \$100,000 on CAI's credit cards. Mr. Mortenson has never provided any receipts for these expenses, and repeatedly ignored my requests for their submission.... Mr. Mortenson has refused to submit even one travel voucher.... In order to allocate indirect expenses, it is imperative that I receive time sheets from all employees. Since March 2004, Mr. Mortenson has failed to submit a time sheet....

On May 27, 2004, I again reported to the Board the serious situation as it related to overseas expenses. At that time, there was over \$100,000 in unaccounted overseas expenses. Mr. Mortenson agreed to provide all documentation for overseas expenses. To date, he has not produced the promised documents in any meaningful manner. In fact, currently CAI has spent over \$270,000 *in cash and wire transfers* [emphasis by Raynor] without proper documentation

as to the disbursement of this money. There is no record to who ultimately received these monies or the manner in which it was spent.

Mr. Mortenson has reported that measures have been implemented to resolve the unsubstantiated overseas documentation; however, no specifics have been forthcoming.

In August 2004, I learned that information given to me to be placed in the Annual Report is untrue and therefore fraudulent.

Unfortunately, Mr. Mortenson has determined that he has no need of providing financial information to the CFO. These circumstances are untenable. I am unable to fulfill the duties and responsibilities as CFO and Staff Supervisor. Thus, I had no alternative but to resign from CAI effective September 3, 2004.

* * *

IN MARCH 2006, Viking Penguin published *Three Cups of Tea* in hardcover. Later that year, the CAI board of directors increased Mortenson's annual salary to \$145,000. When the paperback edition of *Three Cups* came out in January 2007, the book vaulted to the top of the *New York Times* paperback nonfiction bestseller list and remained at number one for forty-three weeks. To capitalize on the resulting publicity, Mortenson resolved to turn CAI "into a promotion-and-fund-raising machine" by launching what amounted to a perpetual book tour—an exhausting schedule of public appearances that is still ongoing (as of April

2011). This relentless marketing campaign has reaped impressive rewards. In 2006, CAI's total revenue amounted to \$1.6 million. In 2007 it was \$3.8 million. In 2008, it ballooned to \$14.1 million, and in 2009 (the most recent year for which CAI has filed a tax return), it was \$14.3 million. In 2010, according to statements by Mortenson, CAI received more than \$20 million in donations.

Mortenson has not been shy about taking credit for the windfall CAI has received from his promotional efforts. He has been more reticent about acknowledging the millions of dollars that have flowed into his personal bank account along the way. It may surprise many people who have donated money to CAI, as it surprised me, to learn that CAI receives none of the proceeds from any of Mortenson's books. All of the royalties from *Three Cups of Tea* are split equally by Mortenson and David Relin. All of the royalties from his other books are paid to Mortenson alone.

Although Mortenson concedes that CAI receives none of the proceeds from his books, in a press release issued on April 16, 2011, the CAI board of directors asserted, "Greg has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the organization, which includes a percentage of his royalties from his books, and worked for the organization without compensation for a number of years." But such claims appear to contradict financial statements posted on CAI's website. Nothing in the foundation's financial records indicates Mortenson has ever donated anything close to hundreds of thousands of dollars to CAI, and the financial records of both CAI and the American Himalayan Foundation show, without question, that Mortenson has received a salary for his humanitarian work every year since 1995.

CAI supporters may be even more dismayed to learn, as I was, that although CAI receives no royalties from Mortenson's books, CAI has paid virtually all of the expenses incurred by Mortenson, Relin, and at least some of his uncredited ghostwriters while they were researching, writing, and promoting the books. These expenses have included cameras, computers, writers' advances, and travel. When Mortenson has traveled domestically to promote his books in recent years, he has usually flown on chartered jets, and CAI has paid millions of dollars for these charters. CAI has also paid millions of dollars to run numerous ads to promote Mortenson's books in upscale publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and *The New York Times*.

Since the publication of *Three Cups* five years ago, Mortenson has made several hundred appearances to talk about CAI and his books. Presently, demand for Mortenson as a speaker is stronger than it's ever been, and he is booked solid through the end of 2011. As Mortenson writes in *Stones into Schools*,

each time I travel somewhere new, I am still shocked by the sheer number of people who flock to hear this tale. Last summer in Boston...the organizers of a talk I was giving at Northeastern University...booked me into a hockey stadium and filled the place with 5,600 people. A week later at a basketball arena in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 9,500 folks showed up and my speech had to be broadcast on a JumboTron.

Using CAI funds, Mortenson has purchased many tens of thousands of copies of *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones into Schools*, which he has subsequently handed out to attendees at his speaking engagements. A significant number of these books were charged to CAI's Pennies for Peace program, contrary to Mortenson's frequent assertions that CAI uses "every penny" of every donation made to Pennies for Peace to support schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Rather than buy Mortenson's books at wholesale cost from his publisher, moreover, CAI has paid retail price from commercial outlets such as Borders, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon. Buying from retailers allows Mortenson to receive his author's royalty for each book given away, and also allows these handouts to augment his ranking on national bestseller lists. (Had he ordered the books from his publisher, Mortenson would not have received a royalty, nor would bestseller lists reflect those purchases.) According to one of Mortenson's friends, when he learned that Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* had bumped *Three Cups of Tea* from number one down to number two on the *New York Times* paperback nonfiction list, "Greg was furious. He started buying books like crazy, with the CAI credit card, to try and put *Three Cups* back on top."

Book sales aside, Mortenson's speaking engagements—which are arranged by the Penguin Speakers Bureau, a division of the corporation that publishes his books, Penguin Group USA—are extremely lucrative for him. When Mortenson travels to speak, he typically does two or three events per city. He appears at many of them pro bono, but for some sixty events each year he charges upwards of \$30,000 per event, plus \$3,000 in travel expenses. According to former CAI staffers, the Institute has received none

of the millions of dollars Mortenson has received for such events. In fact, CAI has never received the \$3,000 per booking Mortenson gets reimbursed for travel expenses, despite the fact that CAI, not Mortenson, has paid for all of his travel costs (including chartered jets and deluxe hotel suites), as well as expenses incurred by family members and personal assistants who often travel with him. “Greg is of the attitude that CAI exists because of him,” says an ex-staffer who held a senior position in the organization’s Montana office. “Any money he raises for CAI, according to Greg’s logic, is therefore his money, and he can spend it however he wants.”

According to the CAI website, “Central Asia Institute is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to use every dollar contributed as efficiently as possible. It is our goal to spend no more than 15% of your donation on overhead (administrative and fundraising costs), and to spend 85% of your contribution on our programs.” What this statement fails to disclose is that for accounting purposes, CAI reports the millions of dollars it spends on book advertising and chartered jets as “program expenses,” rather than as fundraising or other overhead. Were they reported honestly, CAI’s fundraising and administrative expenses would actually exceed 50 percent of its annual budget. In 2009, according to an audited financial report, CAI spent just under \$4 million building and operating schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, a sum that includes construction costs, school supplies, teachers’ salaries, student scholarships, and travel expenses for program managers. In the same year, CAI spent more than \$4.6 million on “Domestic outreach and education, lectures and guest appearances across the United States”—an amount that included \$1.7 million to promote

Mortenson's books. CAI reported all of this \$4.6 million on its tax return as expenses for "programs."

In a confidential memo dated January 3, 2011, an attorney who examined CAI's most recent federal tax return advised Mortenson and the board of directors that CAI's outlays for book advertising and travel expenses for Mortenson's speaking engagements appeared to be in violation of Section 4859 of the Internal Revenue Service Code, which prohibits board members and executive officers of a public charity from receiving an excessive economic benefit from the charity. (Since 1998, Mortenson has served as both CAI's executive director and as a board member; presently, the board of directors consists solely of Mortenson and two other members.) The memo, written by a lawyer at the firm Copilevitz & Canter, warned:

Assume that in auditing the Central Asia Institute, the IRS finds that in fiscal year 2009, Mr. Mortenson received an excess benefit from his charity in the amount of \$2,421,152.71 (assuming that CAI's advertising expenses related to Mr. Mortenson's books were \$1,022,319.71 and travel expenses related to Mr. Mortenson's speaking engagements were \$1,398,831 as reported on the organization's 990 for...2009; and further, the charity received none of the revenue that Mr. Mortenson received from said book sales or speaking events).... Further, assuming Mr. Mortenson received the same or similar excess benefit for the previous two years, and the IRS looked back to these years in its audit (as is often the case), Mr. Mortenson could owe CAI up to \$7,263,458.13 for excessive

benefits received during fiscal years 2007, 2008, and 2009.... [I]f Mr. Mortenson fails to timely pay the correction amount, he could face a total liability ranging from \$7,868,746.31...to \$23,606,238.62.

An example of the “excessive benefits” provided to Mortenson were several full-page color advertisements in *The New Yorker* to promote Mortenson’s books; CAI paid for all of these ads, each of which, according to the magazine’s published ad rates, cost more than \$100,000. Another example: CAI has routinely paid for extravagances such as a four-day excursion by Mortenson to the Telluride Mountain Film Festival in May 2010, where he was a featured speaker. A Learjet was chartered to fly Mortenson, his wife and children, and four other individuals from Montana to Colorado and back. CAI rented multiple residences in Telluride to house the entourage. Lavish meals were billed to the foundation. The jet charter alone cost CAI more than \$15,000.

“For a charity that exists to help the poor in the developing world,” says Daniel Borochoff, president of the charity watchdog the American Institute of Philanthropy, “this is pretty outrageous behavior. Mortenson is acting as if CAI was his own private business. It’s not. He’s using the public’s money. CAI is a tax-exempt organization subsidized by our tax dollars. It sounds like he’s violating every financial practice that nonprofits are supposed to follow. It’s very important that any nonprofit separate personal and private business interests from its charitable interests. CAI should not

be paying for all these expenses that serve to benefit Mortenson personally. The fact that the charity might also benefit doesn't make it OK."

Mortenson's Pennies for Peace program (P4P) is a commendable cultural studies course that also happens to function as a phenomenally effective marketing-and-fundraising scheme for CAI. By pitching P4P directly to kids, their teachers, and school administrators, Mortenson has induced nearly three thousand schools in the United States and Canada to make P4P part of their standard K–12 curriculum. Hundreds of thousands of children have contributed their lunch money in response to P4P fundraising appeals. "The Pennies for Peace money, every single penny, we put it very quickly to use over in Pakistan and Afghanistan," Mortenson has assured these students and their parents. "All of the money is used for supplies, for books.... Everything is used to help the kids out."⁶ In 2009, schoolchildren donated \$1.7 million to Pennies for Peace. But CAI's total 2009 outlay for the things P4P is supposed to pay for—teachers' salaries, student scholarships, school supplies, basic operating expenses—amounted to a paltry \$612,000. By comparison, in 2009 CAI spent more than \$1 million to promote sales of *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones into Schools*, and another \$1.4 million to fly Mortenson around in chartered jets. Donors unknowingly picked up the tab for all of it.

Part III

GHOST SCHOOLS

“But education is a sacred thing, and the pledge to build a school is a commitment that cannot be surrendered or broken....”

—Greg Mortenson, *Stones into Schools*

“TAKING GREAT PERSONAL RISKS to seed the region that gave birth to the Taliban with schools, Mortenson goes to war with the root causes of terror every time he offers a student a chance to receive a balanced education, rather than attend an extremist *madrassa*.” This trope, from the introduction to *Three Cups of Tea*, is brandished by Mortenson as a central theme in all of his books and in most of his public utterances. The message he seeks to convey is that CAI schools are typically built in areas where fundamentalist madrassas are ubiquitous, and that his schools prevent the nearby madrassas from transforming kids into suicide bombers.

This simply is not true, and Mortenson knows it isn't true. Only a small fraction of his schools are found in locales that might be characterized as breeding grounds for terrorists. In Afghanistan, the majority of schools CAI has established are in areas where the Taliban has little influence or is simply nonexistent, such as the Panjshir Valley and the Wakhan Corridor. In Pakistan, most of the CAI schools are situated in a region the size of West Virginia that used to be known as the Northern Areas but in 2009 was officially designated Gilgit-Baltistan. North of Gilgit-Baltistan lies Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor; to the northeast, across the towering peaks of the Karakoram, is China; to the southeast is the fiercely disputed border with India—the so-called Line of Control.

Despite its proximity to contested areas of Kashmir administered by India, Gilgit-Baltistan is a tranquil land that has thus far escaped most of the violence afflicting so many other parts of the region. Ethnically diverse, the inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan are followers of Shia, Sunni, Ismaili, and

Nurbakhshi interpretations of Islam, and “have historically lived in relative harmony,” according to Nosheen Ali, a sociologist with a doctorate from Cornell who has conducted extensive research in Gilgit-Baltistan. In an article titled “Books vs. Bombs? Humanitarian Development and the Narrative of Terror in Northern Pakistan,” published in the academic journal *Third World Quarterly*, Dr. Ali writes, “The most troubling irony is that the focal region of Mortenson’s work—the Shia region of Baltistan with its Tibetan-Buddhist heritage—has nothing to do with the war on terror, yet is primarily viewed through this lens in [*Three Cups of Tea*].”

“Baltistan is the most peaceful part of Pakistan,” Ghulam Parvi confirms. Mortenson hired Parvi in 1996 to be CAI’s Pakistan program manager—the organization’s first overseas employee. According to *Three Cups*, Parvi is “known and respected throughout Skardu as a devout Shiite scholar.... ‘Without Ghulam Parvi, I never would have accomplished anything in Pakistan,’ Mortenson says.”

Last summer, Mortenson, the CAI staff, and the CAI board of directors received a surprising email from Parvi announcing that “he is retired from CAI USA from 30th of June, 2010, due to Greg’s unhealthy attitude.” Parvi’s split with CAI can be attributed to several factors, but at the top of the list is the pervasive dishonesty of *Three Cups*. “In his book,” Parvi explained in a letter to me,

Greg describes false stories to make the book interesting and sensitive, so that he would become very famous and fund raising make easy. Greg did so and he is really successful in his interior

motives. But on the other hand, innocent people working with him in Pakistan, especially in Baltistan, had to face disgrace, loathsome from the society, religiously bashfulness and financial losses. Times and again Greg Mortenson was requested not to perform such acts, which bring bad name and defame to us, but he always very politely and smilingly neglected our requests.

Parvi was extremely disturbed that Mortenson devoted five pages of *Three Cups* (pages 241-245) to an alarmist disquisition on *Wahhabism* after he purportedly drove past a *Wahhabi* madrassa in the Balti village of Gulapor shortly before 9/11:

...Pakistan's most virulent incubator of religious extremism—*Wahhabi madrassas*....

In December 2000, the Saudi publication *Ain-Al-Yaqeen* reported that one of the four major *Wahhabi* proselytizing organizations, the Al Haramain Foundation, had built “1,100 mosques, schools, and Islamic centers,” in Pakistan and other Muslim countries, and employed three thousand paid proselytizers in the previous year....

“In 2001, CAI operations were scattered all the way across northern Pakistan...,” Mortenson says. “But our resources were peanuts compared to the *Wahhabi*. Every time I visited to check one of our projects, it seemed ten *Wahhabi madrassas* had popped up nearby overnight.”

From someone who presents himself as a steadfast opponent of anti-Muslim bigotry, such fear-mongering is hard to square. According to Nosheen Ali, madrassas are hardly a new phenomenon in Gilgit-Baltistan, nor are they cause for alarm. Such schools have been providing religious education to a variety of Muslim sects for a very long time. But this region, she emphasizes, “is not a terrain teeming with fundamentalist madrassas and Taliban on the loose—the definitive image of the region in [*Three Cups of Tea*].” The subtext of Mortenson’s book, she rebukes, is “rooted in a narrative of fear and danger” that’s deliberately misleading.

On June 13, 2010, Parvi convened a meeting in Skardu to discuss *Three Cups of Tea*. Some thirty community leaders from throughout Baltistan participated, and most of them were outraged by the excerpts Parvi translated for them. Sheikh Muhammad Raza—chairman of the education committee at a refugee camp in Gultori village, where CAI has built a primary school for girls—angrily proposed charging Mortenson with the crime of fomenting sectarian unrest, and urged the District Administration to ban Mortenson and his books from Baltistan.

Three months after Parvi held this forum, Mortenson received another email warning that he was no longer welcome in Baltistan. It arrived out of the blue from Tanya Rosen, an international lawyer and wildlife researcher with degrees from Bard College, the Università Statale of Milano, Harvard Law School, and the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. “Dear Greg,” it began,

I wrote you a couple of years ago back when I was planning on going to do some work in the Wakhan. I am primarily a scientist working on wildlife and conservation issues but obviously in places like the Wakhan such issues go hands in hands with development, livelihoods and education. Anyway the plan to go to the Wakhan has been postponed for a bit because instead friends and colleagues in Gilgit-Baltistan asked me to come help with snow leopard conservation work.... This summer I worked in Hushey, Khandey, Shigar and Baisha valleys, Krabathang etc.... The reason I am writing you is that the school you built in Hushey is empty and unused (beautiful by the way) and could not confirm that but people I ran into in Skardu and other villages told me that there are other schools you have built that apparently are not used. What was even more surprising was the fact that many people I talked to (about snow leopards) inevitably (because I live in Montana) asked me if I knew you and took that opportunity to share a series of negative feelings such as: “the book is full of lies”, “Dr. Greg built the schools but did not provide funding for teachers, stationery etc.”, “he is banned from G-B”. Hearing this was sad and disappointing, at the same time I know that becoming successful attracts envy or that sometimes even when you are well-meaning things do not turn out the way you want them.

Rosen’s report that some CAI schools were empty—including the Hushe school, which Mortenson has long trumpeted as one of his most satisfying

accomplishments—was disturbing. When I asked Rosen to elaborate, she replied that the elders of Hushe village told her “the school was built by Mortenson and that’s where the support ended.” It was run thereafter by government teachers, and the “poor quality of education was one of the reasons that the community decided to set up its own private school in a more modest building nearby with a more varied curriculum which includes English.”

CAI has become proficient at erecting schools off the beaten path, and Mortenson deserves praise for that. But filling those schools with effective teachers and actually educating children turn out to be much more difficult than constructing schoolrooms. On this front, Mortenson has delivered far less than he has professed.

On April 15, 2010, Mortenson was the featured speaker at a conference presented on Edutopia, the website of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, during which he stated, “The most important thing in any school is obviously a teacher.... So we provide teacher training and support.”⁷ Students at CAI schools, he assured his audience, “learn to read and write, science, math, everything else. They also, by fifth grade, they learn five languages, including Arabic and English. One of the things we stress is not only that they learn how to read and write Arabic, but they learn how to understand Arabic.... We put a lot of emphasis now on teacher training.... It goes on for a month about twice a year.”

Mortenson has made similar assertions on countless occasions, including a Charlie Rose interview broadcast on July 27, 2010. As recently as March 26 of this year, he told a reporter from the *Spokane Spokesman-Review*,

“We supply the teacher training and support...we have a teacher-training program and we have emphasized that quite a bit.” In the case of the Hushe school, such claims are patently untrue, and they also turn out to be bogus for all but a handful of CAI projects. The statement about students learning five languages is absolutely false, says a CAI staffer, “not even true for a single school.” Most teachers, this staffer also reports, have never received any training from CAI.

Even more alarming is the fact that a significant number of CAI schools exist only on paper. The CAI website, for example, lists eight schools that have been completed in Afghanistan’s Konar Province; during his Charlie Rose interview, Mortenson claimed he’d built eleven schools there. At that time, he had built only three schools in Konar; in the months since, he has built a fourth.

Many CAI schools that actually did get built, moreover, were later abandoned due to lack of CAI support. “Ghost schools,” they’re called by the disillusioned residents of Baltistan, where at least eighteen CAI buildings now stand empty. No one, not even Mortenson, knows exactly how many CAI projects exist as ghost schools, or simply never existed in the first place, because he has repeatedly subverted efforts by his Montana-based staff to track effectively how many schools have been built, how much each school actually costs, and how many schools are up and running. For the CAI staff to gather such crucial information, Mortenson would have to accurately account for how he spends CAI funds—something he has never been willing to do.

Instead, for years the CAI books have been cooked to order. In 2010, for example, when CAI's financial records underwent a long-delayed audit by an independent accounting firm (as the law requires in most of the states where CAI conducts fundraising), the auditor requested documentation from 2009 that showed how much CAI spent on each of its overseas school projects. Such documentation didn't exist, however, so CAI staffers fabricated it. Because they lacked invoices and receipts with which to determine the schools' true costs, in many cases they simply guessed how many students might plausibly be enrolled at each school (or conjured a number out of thin air) and then applied an arbitrary formula based on school size to come up with a fictitious cost for each school. For example, if they imagined a school to have between 300 to 600 students, the school was said to cost \$50,000 to build (according to this formula), and its annual operating expenses came to \$7,500. Schools reported to have 601 to 1,000 students were said to cost \$65,000 to build and \$9,000 to operate. By this method, CAI staffers created a fraudulent document and gave it to the auditor. Astoundingly, the auditor accepted the document as genuine, no red flags were raised, and CAI posted the ensuing "Independent Auditor's Report" on its website in May 2010.



DURING MORTENSON'S Edutopia webinar in April 2010, someone asked him if he still visits Korphe. "I go to Pakistan and Afghanistan three times a year, maybe three to four months a year," Mortenson replied. "I try

to go to every school every year.” But according to CAI staffers, Mortenson hasn’t been to Korphe—or anywhere else in Baltistan—since 2007, and he has never laid eyes on most of the CAI schools. Indeed, many CAI schools have never received a visit from any CAI employee.

To a certain extent, this failure has resulted from insufficient staffing. For the past three years, Mortenson has devoted the bulk of his time to getting *Stones into Schools* published, promoting his books, fulfilling remunerative speaking gigs, and fundraising. These days neither he nor any of his Montana-based employees goes to Central Asia to oversee programs firsthand, and his entire staff in Pakistan and Afghanistan consists of just eleven people responsible for more than a hundred projects, a large number of which require many days, or even weeks, of travel to visit.

The root of the problem, however, lies in Mortenson’s dysfunctional management. Whenever CAI staff members have attempted to closely monitor Central Asian programs, some of them report, he’s thwarted their efforts. In 2003 and 2004, a woman named Kate DeClerk came on board as CAI’s program director. She traveled to Pakistan to document the organization’s projects there, and discovered a number of ghost schools. When Mortenson continued to extol these failed projects as proud CAI achievements, DeClerk quit.

After Mortenson refused to comply with CFO Debbie Raynor’s repeated requests to provide documentation for overseas programs, Raynor contacted Ghulam Parvi (the Pakistan program manager) directly, instructing him to provide her with documentation. For two or three months Parvi complied—

until Mortenson found out what was going on and ordered Parvi to stop. Raynor resigned.

In 2007, Mortenson hired an accomplished consultant to periodically fly to Central Asia to supervise projects. When he discovered irregularities and shared them with Mortenson, Mortenson took no action to rectify the misconduct. In 2010, the consultant quit in frustration.

In September 2007, CAI hired a highly motivated, uncommonly capable woman to manage its international programs. Quickly, she demonstrated initiative and other leadership skills the Institute sorely needed. She had exceptional rapport with Pakistani women and girls. In 2008, she unearthed serious issues in Baltistan that contradicted what Mortenson had been reporting. After she told Mortenson about these problems, she assumed he would want her to address them. Instead, as she prepared to return to Pakistan in 2009, Mortenson ordered her to stay away from Baltistan. Disillusioned, she resigned in June 2010.

When asked about the high turnover of talented employees, a person who worked for CAI during this period replies, “Greg is always fucking with people, intentionally undermining them. That’s his management style. He does everything in his power to keep everyone off balance. He did not like people discovering things.”

Last June, when Parvi announced his resignation and accused Mortenson of writing “false and baseless stories in the book which is against Islam, Baltistan and Pakistan,” Mortenson attempted to discredit Parvi by revealing that in November 2007, Parvi had confessed to embezzling approximately \$50,000 from CAI. Mortenson and the CAI

board received the confession via email shortly before Parvi embarked on a sacred pilgrimage to Mecca:

I am planning to leave Skardu for Saudi Arabia to perform HAJJ.... A Muslim believes that during Hajj, he has to openly admit all his SINS before the Allah Almighty and seek forgiveness.... Since I have to admit all my bad things, which I had performed without any witness and record, yet I believe Allah Almighty knows. Since there is no excuse, I also want to submit the same situation before you and the CAI Board Members. I admit that willingly or unwillingly I have spent the wealth of CAI at my own. Please Sir, do not hesitate to tell me every thing. I am mentally prepared to make good all losses which I had to CAI.... So Sir, if I am dead and could not come back home, Insha Allah you will not face any problem in getting the available assets of CAI. I have proper record of all the income and expenses of CAI which can be presented before any time.

Upon receiving this email, Mortenson neither fired Parvi nor probed further into his misconduct; according to staffers, doing so would have exposed the existence of ghost schools and other secrets that Mortenson didn't want to come to light.

Parvi is not the only CAI employee to have misappropriated funds, and to no small degree Mortenson shares responsibility for the wrongdoing. Over the past sixteen years, he has disbursed millions of dollars in cash to

CAI workers in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and has supervised these employees erratically at best. Brief flurries of intense micromanagement have preceded lengthy periods with no guidance whatsoever. The program director in Kabul went a year without hearing from Mortenson. During one extended silence, Mortenson failed to contact Parvi for an even longer interval. Staff in the Montana office would take calls from Parvi pleading for instructions, begging for Greg to phone him.

Although Mortenson urged his foreign employees to use CAI funds frugally and not waste a single rupee, his deeds contradicted his words. When Mortenson traveled through Pakistan and Afghanistan, he often brought a Pelican equipment case holding bricks of hundred-dollar bills, and he spent huge sums capriciously, frequently on things that seemed to have little or nothing to do with schools. Chartered helicopters flew journalists and VIPs from one end of Pakistan to the other. Favors were asked of powerful individuals, who were rewarded lavishly for their help. When the American office staff implored Mortenson to document his expenses, Mortenson routinely ignored them. Adept at reading their mercurial boss, the overseas staff concluded that cash was abundant and bookkeeping was merely a contrivance done for appearance' sake. As long as Greg went home with inspiring tales to keep the donations flowing, they took for granted that no one would miss a few thousand dollars here and there.



IN 2008, Mortenson hired the veteran sportswriter Mike Bryan to write a sequel to *Three Cups of Tea*, which was still perched atop the major bestseller lists. By the end of that year Mortenson signed an agreement with Viking Penguin to publish the new book, which didn't yet have a title. The deal included a \$700,000 advance to be paid to MC Consulting, Inc., a company Mortenson created in 1998 to shelter his personal wealth.

When Mortenson read a partial draft of Bryan's manuscript in the spring of 2009, he thought it lacked sizzle. So he hired Kevin Fedarko—the journalist who'd authored the *Parade* article that catapulted Mortenson out of obscurity—to rework Bryan's draft and ghostwrite the remainder of the book on an extremely tight schedule. Writing sixteen hours a day for more than a hundred consecutive days, Fedarko completed the job in time for *Stones into Schools* to appear in bookstores twenty-five days before Christmas 2009.⁸

“Picking up where *Three Cups of Tea* left off in 2003,” the book's dust jacket announced, “*Stones into Schools* traces the CAI's efforts to work...in the secluded northeast corner of Afghanistan.” The story hinges on the challenges Mortenson and his staff must overcome to construct a school in the most remote part of the Wakhan Corridor, a roadless region “where the frigid waters of a shallow, glassy blue lake lap at the edges of a grass-covered field known as Bozai Gumbaz.” Here, 13,000 feet above sea level in the Pamir mountains, Kyrgyz herders “struggle to uphold an ancestral lifestyle that represents one of the last great nomadic horse cultures on earth.”

Mortenson, who has deft storytelling instincts, had foreshadowed the narrative arc of *Stones into Schools* on pages 250–252 of *Three Cups*. This passage recounts how, in the fall of 2000, Mortenson happened to be visiting a village in northeastern Pakistan called Zuudkhan, just below a 16,300-foot pass that marked the border with Afghanistan, when a band of Kyrgyz horsemen galloped down from the heights. They

rode straight for him like a pack of rampaging bandits. There were a dozen of them coming fast, with bandoliers bulging across their chests, matted beards, and homemade riding boots that rose above their knees. “They jumped off their horses and came right at me,” Mortenson says. “They were the wildest-looking men I’d ever seen. My detention in Waziristan flashed in my mind and I thought, ‘Uh-oh! Here we go again.’”

The leader of the posse, named Roshan Khan, stood nose to nose with Mortenson and demanded, “We know about Dr. Greg build school in Pakistan so you can come build for us?” Khan invited Mortenson to ride back over the pass with him and remain in the Wakhan for the winter as his guest, “so we can have good discuss and make school.”

Mortenson explained to Khan that his wife expected him back in Montana in a few days, so he couldn’t hie off to the Pamir for the winter. But he silently “swore to himself he’d find some way” to help Khan and his fellow Kyrgyz, and then promised he’d come visit Khan as soon as possible to talk about the school. Satisfied, Roshan Khan jumped on his horse and

rode back over the mountains to the Wakhan, where he related the pledge he'd extracted from Mortenson to his father—a venerated figure named Abdul Rashid Khan, supreme leader of the Afghan Kyrgyz, who plays a starring role in the finale of *Stones into Schools*.

In *Stones* (pages 29–30), Mortenson says his encounter with Roshan Khan occurred in 1999, rather than 2000, and includes a number of details that are at odds with the account in *Three Cups*. But no matter: According to Mortenson, he had sworn a solemn oath. “Just as *Three Cups of Tea* began with a promise—to build a school in Korphe, Pakistan—so too does Mortenson’s new book,” proclaims the dust jacket for *Stones*: “to construct a school in an isolated pocket of the Pamir Mountains known as Bozai Gumbaz.”

Sixty-four pages into the book, Mortenson expounds further on his promise to the Kyrgyz:

Roshan Khan and I enacted a ritual that I recognized from six years earlier, when Haji Ali had stood in the barley fields of Korphe and asked me to provide an assurance that I was coming back to him. The leader of the Kirghiz horsemen placed his hand on my left shoulder, and I did the same with him.

“So, you will promise to come to Wakhan to build a school for our children?” he asked, looking me in the eye.

In a place like Zuudkhan, an affirmative response to a question like that can confer an obligation that is akin to a blood oath—and for someone like me, this can be a real problem.... Over the years I

have missed so many plane flights, failed to appear at so many appointments, and broken so many obligations that I long ago stopped keeping track. But education is a sacred thing, and the pledge to build a school is a commitment that cannot be surrendered or broken, regardless of how long it may take, how many obstacles must be surmounted, or how much money it will cost. It is by such promises that the balance sheet of one's life is measured.

By such promises, indeed. Mortenson's sacred pledge to Haji Ali to build a school in Korphe—to repay the villagers for their charity, and to honor his beloved sister—turned out to be a whopper, calculated to sell books and jack up donations. So too did Mortenson's promise to construct a school in Bozai.



FOR THE FIRST PHASE OF THE BOZAI GUMBAZ PROJECT, Mortenson asked an anthropologist named Ted Callahan to help him. An expert mountaineer and climbing guide, Callahan had recently begun research for a doctoral thesis about the Afghan Kyrgyz, and Mortenson wondered if Callahan would be willing to travel to the Kyrgyz homeland—at the easternmost end of the Wakhan Corridor, part of the so-called Pamir Knot, one of the world's most impressive concentrations of mountains—to work as a consultant for CAI in the spring of 2006. Mortenson explained to Callahan, “I view this as an opportunity where you can help me out, we can

help the Kyrgyz out, and I can help you get started with your research.” Callahan thought it sounded like a worthy endeavor. He immediately signed on.

CAI had by then built several schools in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan Province, which encompasses the Wakhan Corridor, but none of the projects was in the high Pamir, where Bozai Gumbaz is situated. Mortenson had never been to the Pamir. There are no roads there. The Wakhan Kyrgyz are nomads who migrate from place to place as they graze their herds. There was no village at Bozai; it was just an expanse of alpine meadow distinguished by a Kyrgyz burial ground and a few mud huts that remained unoccupied most of the year. “My job,” says Callahan, “was to get with the Kyrgyz and figure out how to build a school for a nomadic people.”

Callahan’s initial trip to the Wakhan was not propitious. In Kabul, he met Sarfraz Khan, CAI’s program director for northern Afghanistan, who would travel with him through the Wakhan. Right away, Callahan says, “it became obvious that CAI had no official presence in Afghanistan. It was this seat-of-the-pants operation.... Greg had spoken so highly of Sarfraz, but he can’t even get us seats on the flight to get up there. He’s like, ‘We’re kind of somewhat unregistered.’” Fortunately, Callahan had attended prep school with the Afghan minister of transportation. He phoned the minister, who arranged for him to book two seats on a flight to Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan, Afghanistan’s northernmost province.

Before they flew north, however, Sarfraz learned that a crew of Pakistani workers he had hired to build some schools had gotten arrested and detained for entering Afghanistan illegally. When Sarfraz’s increasingly desperate

attempts to get the workers released failed, he begged Callahan for help. Callahan explained the situation to his mentor, Whitney Azoy, an eminent anthropologist who ran the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, in Kabul. Azoy hosted a dinner for an influential parliamentarian, whom Azoy introduced to Callahan and Sarfraz, and the next day the CAI workers were released. Instead of thanking Callahan for engineering a solution to this serious problem, however, Mortenson became apoplectic. “How dare you compromise my operation!” he blustered.

“It was very odd.” Callahan recalls. “Greg was really pissed off: ‘You guys should not have gotten the government involved in this! I do not work with the government! We deal with local power brokers; that’s how we get stuff done! You have now invited government scrutiny into our operation! We do not need Whitney Azoy’s help with anything!’”

When Callahan told Azoy about Mortenson’s reaction to his gracious act, Azoy was struck with an insight: “Maybe Mortenson thinks he’s a white knight, riding in to rescue Afghanistan single-handedly,” he said. “Afghanistan’s full of expats who want to be saviors. Once they get that idea in their heads, there’s not room for much else.”

By the time Callahan and Sarfraz arrived in Badakhshan and started driving toward the Wakhan Corridor, Callahan’s assessment of Sarfraz, at least, had grown more positive. “He’s actually a very good guy,” says Callahan. As they slowly traveled east down the unpaved, single-lane track, they stopped to inspect several CAI schools under construction, pay laborers for work they had completed, and give them instructions for future

tasks. “Things are going pretty well,” Callahan says. “Then we get to the end of the road, the last village, called Sarhad-i-Boroghil.”

From there they intended to ride horses the final forty or fifty miles to Bozai Gumbaz, but someone had committed a double murder in Sarhad, and the village was swarming with police who’d come to investigate the crime. The police also used the investigation as a pretext to shake down the local citizenry, detaining as a suspect anyone who failed to pay. Because of this tense and potentially dangerous situation, Sarfraz decided to turn around and head back to Faizabad. Not long thereafter, he suffered an acute gallstone attack in the middle of the night, and the ailment appeared to be life threatening.

“He looked like death,” Callahan says. “He’s puking. He’s doubled over in pain. The nearest clinic was probably only ten or fifteen miles away, but ‘T.I.A.’—This Is Afghanistan. The jeep that showed up doesn’t have working lights and the road is bad.” Eventually they arrived at Khundud village, the district capital, where the U.S. Agency for International Development ran a clinic. By then, says Callahan, Sarfraz was “in pretty bad shape. Vomiting a lot. Howling with pain. At the time it seemed pretty dramatic.”

Before arriving in Khundud, Callahan had called Mortenson with Sarfraz’s satellite phone, and Greg, from his home in Montana, frantically began trying to arrange an emergency helicopter evacuation. The treatment Sarfraz received at the USAID clinic greatly relieved his symptoms, however, and in the morning he no longer seemed in imminent danger. So rather than wait for a chopper, Callahan told Mortenson, “We’re going to

just keep driving out of the Wakhan.” Callahan and Sarfraz headed down the valley with an IV in Sarfraz’s arm, and a few days later arrived in the city of Faizabad, where Sarfraz received further treatment and continued to recover.

Still in crisis mode, Mortenson did everything in his power to get Sarfraz on a plane from Faizabad to Kabul, to no avail. So Callahan called Whitney Azoy, who immediately booked seats on a PACTEC flight for both Callahan and Sarfraz, picked them up at the Kabul airport, and gave them a place to stay. After resting, Callahan says, Sarfraz felt fine: “He flashed me his trademark grin and said ‘*Moshkel nist*’—no problem.” Announcing that he would seek a surgical remedy for his ailment when he arrived home, Sarfraz flew to Islamabad the following day. “We said goodbye,” says Callahan, “and that was it.”

Mortenson provides a much more exciting version of this incident in *Stones into Schools*. In his account (on pages 209–213), when Sarfraz arrived in Faizabad, he learned from a doctor that he had a massive septic infection and needed emergency surgery. A Red Cross plane flew him to Kabul International Airport, where upon landing he was immediately whisked across the tarmac to “a special flight arranged by our good friend Colonel Ilyas Mirza, a retired Pakistan military aviator..., [which] was waiting to fly him to Islamabad. Within minutes of arriving at the Combined Military Hospital in Rawalpindi, Sarfraz was rushed directly into surgery.”

“Greg was working the phones hard,” Callahan says, “I’ll give him that. He didn’t sleep for two days. They were calling everyone they knew.... But

we got out of there on our own accord.”

Callahan left Afghanistan in June 2006. He hoped to return to the Wakhan to complete his report for CAI as soon as possible, but by summer’s end he’d heard nothing further from Mortenson about the Bozai project. “Greg is hot and cold,” Callahan remarks philosophically. “When you’ve got his attention you can expect huge email traffic, long phone calls—and then he’ll just kind of disappear and go silent.”

In September 2006, Callahan was in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where he’d been awarded a fellowship at the American University of Central Asia. There was still no word from Mortenson about going back to the Wakhan, so he returned on his own initiative. After traveling overland from Kyrgyzstan to Tajikistan, he crossed the Amu Darya into Afghanistan and made his way to the high Pamir, where he introduced himself to the storied leader of the Afghan Kyrgyz, Abdul Rashid Khan. For the next two days Callahan remained at the khan’s seasonal camp, Karajelga—a clutch of felt-covered yurts near the headwaters of the Little Pamir River, nineteen miles beyond Bozai Gumbaz.

Mortenson devotes most of a chapter in *Stones into Schools* (pages 121–134) to the first and only time he ever met Abdul Rashid Khan—an accidental encounter that occurred in May 2005 in the city of Baharak, fifty miles outside the entrance to the Wakhan Corridor. According to Mortenson, he and Abdul Rashid Khan drew up a formal contract over dinner that stated, in part:

The Kirghiz people, under the leadership of Abdul Rashid Khan, hereby sign this agreement to build a four-room school at Bozai Gumbaz, Wakhan, with the assistance of the registered charity NGO Central Asia Institute.⁹

Central Asia Institute will provide building materials, skilled labor, school supplies, and help with teachers' salary and training.

Seventeen months after this contract was allegedly signed, when Callahan stayed at Karajelga as Abdul Rashid Khan's guest, he spoke at length with him. When Callahan told the sixty-nine-year-old Kyrgyz leader that an American charity called the Central Asia Institute intended to build a school for the Kyrgyz in the Pamir, Abdul Rashid Khan didn't seem to know who Greg Mortenson was, or have any memory of ever meeting him, says Callahan. "Eventually he pulled out a bunch of business cards, including Greg's, but that might have been the only time Greg ever came up.... I think at some point we all come to look the same to them."

To Abdul Rashid, Mortenson was just another Western do-gooder promising alms. The Kyrgyz leader wasn't inclined to reject such an offer from Mortenson or anyone else—although, says Callahan, he would have preferred that CAI build a road to connect the Kyrgyz to the rest of Afghanistan: "That's what they wanted more than anything else in the world—a road. Second, they wanted some kind of health clinic. Third, as kind of an afterthought, they wanted a school." Their rationale for ranking clinics above schools, Callahan explains, was the appalling infant mortality

rate in the Pamir. As one Kyrgyz elder told him, “If 50 percent of the children die before age five, who is there to educate?”

At the time he interviewed Abdul Rashid Khan, Callahan had already visited other Kyrgyz camps to gather information about what kind of school CAI should build, and where. Both Abdul Rashid and his main competitor for influence in the Pamir—an *arbob*, or chieftain, named Haji Osman—were in favor of a boarding school, but nobody wanted to donate a piece of land on which to construct it. “Everybody said that it should be built on someone else’s land,” says Callahan, “because if it was in one of their own camps, they would have to provide fuel to heat it, and food for the students, and all this other stuff. It sounded like a hassle to them, with little return.”

Upon arriving back in Kyrgyzstan to complete his fellowship, Callahan submitted a twenty-one-page report to Mortenson suggesting two sites that seemed appropriate for a CAI school: Bozai Gumbaz and a place called Chelap, nine miles up the valley from Bozai. As for the type of school that should be built, Callahan observed that the nomadic, widely scattered Kyrgyz population argued “in favor of a boarding school, one with a dormitory (plus kitchen) attached to the main body of the school.” In the report’s conclusion, however, Callahan warned, “CAI will not only face the problem of constructing the schools but running them as well.... It is not at all clear where qualified, motivated teachers could be drawn, but it is certain that they would have to come from outside the Afghan Pamirs.” Establishing a successful school that the Kyrgyz would actually use, he continued,

will almost certainly involve challenges unknown in CAI's prior experience.... If CAI hopes to build more than just the nicest stable in the Pamirs, it will need to continually monitor the schools in order to make sure they are supplied, staffed, and run properly.... For these reasons, CAI should carefully consider its commitment to this project, in terms of time and resources, before any further steps are taken.



WHEN CALLAHAN delivered his report in October 2006, it brought his formal association with CAI to a close. But he returned to Afghanistan in June 2007 to conduct research for his doctoral thesis, and spent fifteen months there. For ten of those months he lived with the Kyrgyz in the Pamir, 13,000 feet above sea level, mostly in the camps of Abdul Rashid Khan.

While traveling to and from the high country, he encountered people in the lower reaches of the Wakhan Corridor whom he had met in 2006, when he'd visited the western end of the Wakhan with Sarfraz. Many of these folks—Wakhi villagers, for the most part—assumed he was still working for Dr. Greg, but “I was quick to disabuse them,” Callahan says. They nevertheless deduced that he must know how to contact Mortenson, and they weren't bashful about asking Callahan to forward messages, most of them gripes about CAI schools in the lower Wakhan that remained empty

after construction was completed, or schools that had been “built in the wrong place.”

The cause of the latter problem, says Callahan, was that villages had “learned to game the system.” They understood that if they told Sarfraz or Dr. Greg a woeful story and begged for a school, CAI might build one for them. “The effect was school-building willy-nilly,” Callahan explains. The location of existing government schools wasn’t taken into consideration. “It was just kind of, build a school here, build a school there. Nobody objected. Everyone was willing to grab any kind of development with both hands.”

Acting on the complaints he’d received, in September 2007 Callahan emailed a message to Mortenson:

At the risk of sounding like I’m meddling in CAI business (in truth, I’m busy enough with my own affairs but this keeps coming up), I thought I’d offer some friendly advice and suggest that you plan a trip to the Wakhan at the earliest opportunity. What goodwill you and CAI enjoy is ebbing fast, with the problems in Sarhad and, now, Kret, and I’ve been hearing a lot of grumbling and criticism, plus unflattering rumors, about CAI. A visit from you would go a long way towards settling things.

I mention this not because it’s any concern of mine but because people know that (in theory) I can contact you and they often ask that I do. Specifically, Ghial Beg, the headman of Kret, is very keen to hear from you, as he’s very upset with the status of the school

(built but not open, since the MoE [Ministry of Education] won't certify it or whatever).

I'm now living up with Abdul Rashid [Khan] (though on a short break here in Kabul to deal with visa issues). Although I don't want to get involved in the school you're planning to try and build at Mulk Ali in the Little Pamir [the Bozai project], I might be able to provide information if you need any.

Mortenson responded by sending a sarcastic email to Sarfraz suggesting that Callahan was trying to discredit CAI out of spite, or that the complaints he forwarded were based on false rumors planted by the Aga Khan Development Network, a highly regarded foundation that had been establishing successful development projects in the Wakhan long before CAI arrived on the scene, and that Mortenson considered a rival.

* * *

CONSTRUCTION OF THE BOZAI GUMBAZ school began in the summer of 2008 under the supervision of CAI program director Sarfraz Khan. Ignoring Callahan's recommendation to build a boarding school, Mortenson decided to erect a small, four-room masonry structure, which could be constructed much more easily and much faster. But transporting all the building materials for even a modest building to such a remote location presented enormous logistical challenges. By September 2009, most of these supplies—cement, windows, nails, roofing—had not yet arrived in

Bozai, and the only tangible evidence of the school was the stone foundation marking its perimeter. In the final chapter of *Stones into Schools*, to ratchet up the narrative tension, Mortenson speculates that if CAI failed to complete the school before the snows of October brought construction to a halt, the entire Kyrgyz population would become so discouraged that they might “pull up stakes..., gather together their yurts and their animals, and embark on a Final Exodus” from the Pamir.

There is no evidence that the Kyrgyz actually considered such an exodus, however. A more plausible reason for the urgency Mortenson felt to get the school finished by October was that his publisher had promised bookstores that *Stones into Schools* would be on their shelves by December 1, in time for the last few weeks of the holiday shopping season. The Bozai school was the heart and soul of the book. By September 10, when a dozen yaks arrived in Bozai with the first load of building materials, the publisher had already received most of the manuscript. All that remained was the final chapter—which couldn’t be written until the school was completed. Anxiety over whether a happy ending would take place in time for *Stones* to arrive at bookstores before Christmas created considerable suspense in the offices of Viking Penguin.

To generate suspense on the page, Mortenson injected the failing health of Abdul Rashid Khan into the narrative. The Kyrgyz leader, who was almost seventy-two years old, was in fact terminally ill. But Mortenson took great liberties when he suggested that Abdul Rashid’s final aspiration was to finish the school before his life came to an end:

As word of his illness spread, men and women all across the Pamir had dropped whatever they were doing and begun walking or riding toward Kara Jilga in order to pay their respects and offer their support. The impulse behind this convergence was touching and appreciated, but it meant that manpower was being drained from Bozai Gumbaz precisely when the need for it was greatest.... “This is no time to sit around watching an old man die,” [Abdul Rashid] railed at his well-wishers.... “It is worthless for you to be here when you could be helping to build our future!... This school is our priority.... *Inshallah*, we are going to finish what we have started.”

In Mortenson’s rendering of Abdul Rashid’s last days, nothing mattered to him more than the Bozai school. “Abdul Rashid Khan would have been amused to learn that his dying wish was to see this school completed,” notes Callahan, who knew the man well. “He had a wry sense of humor.”

Nevertheless, according to Mortenson, when Abdul Rashid implored his people to get the job done before he expired, his exhortations incited them to charge out and win one for the Gipper. More than sixty men, Mortenson wrote,

rushed to Bozai Gumbaz and flung themselves into the task of assisting the eight [CAI] masons from [Pakistan] who were directing operations. They worked fourteen hours a day hauling water, mixing cement, and roughing out the roof frame.

A week later, the phone rang in Mortenson's Bozeman home. It was Sarfraz calling from Bozai on his satellite phone:

“No problem sir—the school is finished.”... It was Monday, September 28. Nearly a decade after the original promise had been made to Abdul Rashid Khan's horsemen, the covenant had finally been fulfilled.



A TIDY LITTLE SCHOOLHOUSE now stands in Bozai Gumbaz, and construction was more or less complete by the time Abdul Rashid succumbed to his infirmities in December 2009. But the way things have played out in the real world isn't quite as uplifting as the denouement Mortenson wrote for the book. Bozai, to put it bluntly, is already a ghost school. Although Mortenson's staff reported on CAI's 2009 tax return (dated May 17, 2010) that sixty-six students were enrolled there, the building remains empty. When *New York Times* reporter Edward Wong visited Bozai in the autumn of 2010, he observed,

the school is still trying to fill its classrooms. Kyrgyz parents prefer that their children herd livestock, said Sarfraz Khan, [CAI's] regional manager. “We need to convince the people to send their children to school,” he said.

No classes have been held in Bozai. Furthermore, if the school was built to fulfill some sort of covenant between Mortenson and the Kyrgyz, the Kyrgyz aren't aware of it. Before readers get carried away by the rousing conclusion of *Stones into Schools*, Callahan warns, they should bear in mind that "Greg met Abdul Rashid Khan once, several years earlier in Baharak. He never spoke to him again. He's never been to Bozai or anywhere else in the Pamir. He has no firsthand knowledge of any of the things he wrote about."

Callahan spent the better part of a year living in the Pamir with Abdul Rashid Khan and his son, Roshan Khan, the horseman with whom Mortenson purports to have made his sacred pledge. "Roshan was one of my best friends up there," says Callahan, "and he never, ever mentioned Greg or the school during the months we spent together, never mentioned a sacred promise. The school was just an afterthought to the Kyrgyz."

Callahan doesn't doubt that at some point Mortenson met Roshan Khan in Zuudkhan, just over the mountains from Bozai on the Pakistan side of the border. "But the way Greg tells it," Callahan says, "Abdul Rashid Khan heard that Greg was in Zuudkhan, so he dispatched his son Roshan to plead for a school. That's utter bullshit."

Every September, Callahan explains, the Kyrgyz routinely ride over the mountains to trade at a shrine near Zuudkhan called Baba Gundi Ziarat. During one of these annual trips—most likely in 2000 or 2001—they apparently learned that a wealthy American was in the vicinity, and simply rode over to see what sort of largess they might pry out of him.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of the Bozai saga is that the school Mortenson worked so hard and spent so much to build is never likely to educate a meaningful number of Kyrgyz youth, if any. In his ignorance of the Kyrgyz, Mortenson believed their children would attend the Bozai school in winter, as he indicated in the epilogue to *Stones into Schools*:

[D]uring the six months when the grasslands lie buried beneath the snow and all connection between the Kirghiz and the outside world has been severed—I am told that there will be roughly 200 children who will study at the school....

In winter, temperatures in Bozai routinely plunge to forty degrees below zero, and the nearest Kyrgyz camp is three miles away. It would take at least an hour to reach the school on horseback through knee-deep snowdrifts. “No one is going to attend that school in the winter,” Callahan insists. “Absolutely not.” The only time any Kyrgyz actually pitch their yurts in Bozai is from mid-October to mid-December. But the teachers brought to the Pamir by the Afghan Ministry of Education each year arrive in June or July and depart by the end of September. “Education grinds to a halt throughout the Wakhan district in winter,” says Callahan. “Even the government-run schools are shut. Everyone is hunkered down. So building a school to provide education in the winter is a bad idea. It’s just not going to happen. I’m convinced that the Bozai school was built primarily for the sake of Greg’s book, to anchor the narrative.”

From June through September, when a teacher could conceivably be hired to teach in Bozai, the summer camp inhabited by Abdul Rashid Khan's clan, Karajelga, is situated nineteen miles away—much too far for any children to attend. Haji Osman's summer camp at Kaschsh Gaz is closer to the school—four and a half miles up the hill, a ninety-minute trudge at an energetic clip—but when Callahan visited Osman in September 2010, Osman told him, “We're never going to use it because it's built down there.” The Afghan government provides a teacher who holds classes inside a yurt right in his camp, he pointed out, “so why would our children want to walk all the way down there to go to school, and then have to walk back up at the end of the day? The school is pointless. It's empty. The border police seem to use it sometimes.”



IN ALL FAIRNESS, Greg Mortenson has done much that is admirable since he began working in Baltistan sixteen and a half years ago. He's been a tireless advocate for girls' education. He's established dozens of schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan that have benefited tens of thousands children, a significant percentage of them girls. A huge number of people regard him as a hero, and he inspires tremendous trust. It is now evident, however, that Mortenson recklessly betrayed this trust, damaging his credibility beyond repair.

It might not be too late, though, to salvage the wreckage of Central Asia Institute, which has talented staff and valuable material assets that could

further benefit people in the region. But if CAI is to be pulled back from the brink and rehabilitated, the organization must sever its ties with Mortenson. It needs to overhaul its board of directors, and find a principled executive director to replace him.

During the past several months, as I came to grasp the magnitude of Mortenson's deceit, I felt ashamed at being so easily conned. How could those of us who enabled his fraud—and we are legion—have been so gullible? Ted Callahan attributes the uncritical acceptance of Mortenson and his shtick to the seemingly endless war raging in Central Asia. “The way I’ve always understood Greg,” Callahan reflects, “is that he’s a symptom of Afghanistan. Things are so bad that everybody’s desperate for even one good-news story. And Greg is it. Everything else might be completely fucked up over there, but here’s a guy who’s persuaded the world that he’s making a difference and doing things right.” Mortenson’s tale “functioned as a palliative,” Callahan suggests. It soothed the national conscience. Greg may have used smoke and mirrors to generate the hope he offered, but the illusion made people feel good about themselves, so nobody was in a hurry to look behind the curtain. Although it doesn’t excuse his dishonesty, Mortenson was merely selling what the public was eager to buy.

On April 13, I sent an email to Mortenson. “Please call me at your earliest convenience,” I wrote.

As I believe you have known for quite a while now, I am writing an article that shines a bright light on you and your management of CAI.... If you'd like to respond to the material in my

article before publication, time is growing very short....My only conditions for such a conversation are that everything be on the record and that the conversation be digitally recorded to ensure the accuracy of what is said. I know you are busy, but the allegations I make in my article are quite serious. If you wish to tell me your side of the story before my article is typeset and closes for publication, you need to contact me without delay.

Eighteen minutes after I clicked the “send” button, Mortenson replied,

I greatly appreciate that you reached out to me now so we can meet ASAP to answer any questions you have. I’ll look at my schedule today to see when we can make a meeting happen.

Immediately thereafter, Mortenson’s personal assistant, Jeff McMillan, invited me to fly to Bozeman to interview Greg on Saturday, April 16. “Thanks, Jon,” McMillan said, “for the opportunity to let Greg talk openly and completely before going to press.” In subsequent emails, I confirmed that I had booked my flight and looked forward to interviewing Greg three days hence.

I heard nothing further from either Mortenson or McMillan until the afternoon of April 15, when Mortenson informed me, “If we do an interview, I would like that there is no digital recording. I’m on my way to my doctor as my oxygen saturation is very low.”

I replied,

If we do the interview, it has to be recorded. This point is non-negotiable. I will, however, promise that I will not share the audio with anyone else, I will not post the audio on the Web, and I will not give the audio to *60 Minutes*¹⁰ or any other news organization.... I would think you would want me to record the interview, to ensure the accuracy of what I write. I will provide a copy of the digital recording to you.

“We are currently at cardiologist in Bozeman,” Mortenson’s assistant answered. “Greg is having a heart procedure done Monday morning [April 18] and will not be available for any type of interview.” I immediately phoned McMillan to express my concern for Mortenson’s health, and to suggest that we conduct the interview by phone instead of in person, at a time convenient for Greg. McMillan said that would not be possible. This was the last communication I received from either McMillan or Mortenson.

* * *

IN MARCH when I attended Mortenson’s lecture in Cheyenne, the experience unsettled me. After taking my seat, while waiting for the program to begin, I read the six-page brochure that had been handed out to everyone in the audience, and I noticed it included the usual lies: the Korphe myth, Mortenson’s “eight-day armed kidnapping by the Taliban,” the claim that for sixteen years he has built schools in “places often

considered the front lines of the ‘War on Terror.’” The next morning, I called Tom Hornbein to talk about the feelings that seeing Greg in person for the first time in years had stirred. It was Hornbein who initially introduced me to Greg, fourteen years ago, and my description of the Cheyenne event roiled Tom’s emotions as well. Reflecting on his own bewildering relationship with Mortenson, he jotted down his thoughts and sent them to me a few hours after our conversation.

“My transcendent emotional feeling is grief for the loss of what might have been,” Hornbein wrote. “Like you, I feel as if I was stupidly conned, wanting to believe in the cause and its value and Greg’s motivations. Part of me still wants to believe that there was/is something sincere in what he was setting about to do to change the world a bit for the better. Another part of me is just downright angry at his irresponsibility to the cause with which he was entrusted, the lives of so many whom he sucked in and, in effect, spit out, and not least Tara and their kids and other loving bystanders to the play.... I wish I understood the pathology that has compelled the unending need to embellish the truth so flagrantly. With one hand Greg has created something potentially beautiful and caring (regardless of his motives). With the other he has murdered his creation by his duplicity.”

Endnotes

¹ According to *Three Cups of Tea* (pages 10 and 44), Mortenson was an accomplished mountaineer who, before attempting K2, had made “half a dozen successful Himalayan ascents,” including climbs of 24,688-foot Annapurna IV and 23,389-foot Baruntse, both of which are in Nepal. But there is no record in the *American Alpine Journal* (which meticulously documents all ascents of Annapurna IV, Baruntse, and other major Himalayan peaks) of Mortenson reaching the summit of, or even attempting, any Himalayan mountain prior to 1993. Scott Darsney, Greg’s climbing partner on K2, confirms that Mortenson had never been to the Himalaya or Karakoram before going to K2.

² In addition to the article by Mortenson in the American Himalayan Foundation newsletter, irrefutable evidence that he originally intended the school to be built in Khane exists in the form of a memo he submitted to Jean Hoerni and the AHF board of directors on March 19, 1995. Entitled “RELOCATION OF PROJECT SITE,” the memo explained that Mortenson no longer thought Khane was the right place for the school. “THE PROBLEM WAS OBTAINING A LAND TITLE CERTIFICATE FOR THE SCHOOL IN KHANE.... AFTER MANY WEEKS, I AM HIGHLY RECOMMENDING MOVING THE PROJECT SITE TO KORPHE VILLAGE (SEE MAP).” Reasons Mortenson gave for relocating the

project included, “KORPHE HAS HAD A FULL TIME VOLUNTEER TEACHER FOR FIVE YEARS, MARRIED AND WITH FAMILY ALL FROM KORPHE.... KORPHE IS HIGHLY VISIBLE. EVERY TREK, EXPEDITION, AND ARMY CARAVAN TO ENTER THE BALTORO/BIAFO WILL PASS BY OUR SCHOOL.” Near the end of the memo, he added, “TO BUILD A SCHOOL IN KORPHE, WE WILL NEED TO BUILD A STEEL CABLE SUSPENSION BRIDGE ACROSS THE BRALDU TO KORPHE.... THE COST OF THE BRIDGE WILL BE ABOUT \$10,000. WHICH I WILL RAISE ON MY OWN. I HOPE TO BEGIN BUILDING BY MAY 1995.”

³ Mortenson’s lies deeply offended Naimat Gul Mahsud. By falsely claiming to have been kidnapped by his hosts and threatened with death—an egregious contravention of *Pashtunwali*—Mortenson defamed the Mahsud clan. But aspects of Naimat Gul’s own story turn out to be as fishy as Mortenson’s. What Naimat Gul failed to disclose to Mortenson (and what Mortenson would likely never have known had it not been disclosed here) is that Naimat Gul was a professional con artist. Although his late father, Nadir Khan, had been a famous war hero and the revered leader of one of the four Mahsud clans, Naimat Gul Mahsud “is just a criminal,” says Hussein Mohammed (a pseudonym employed for the safety of the source), who has known Naimat Gul since he was a boy. “Cheating here, cheating there. Live this place, then move to some other place to cheat some other people.” According to Mohammed, Naimat Gul has a long history of thievery, extortion, and counterfeiting. He was sentenced to life in prison

for kidnapping a girl, but escaped from jail a year or two before meeting Mortenson, and has been on the lam ever since.

Naimat Gul committed most of his crimes in sprawling cities such as Karachi, Dera Ismail Khan, and Peshawar. While he escorted Mortenson around the tribal areas, however, Naimat Gul used Mortenson as an unwitting shill to pass counterfeit Pakistani rupees in the bazaars of North and South Waziristan. “Local people trusted Greg,” says Mohammed, because “he is a foreigner and he would not cheat them.”

When this swindle proved successful, Naimat Gul attempted to profit in a grander fashion from Mortenson’s visit by hatching an ill-advised blackmail scam: Naimat Gul falsely claimed that he had kidnapped Mortenson, then demanded a large ransom from wealthy members of the Mahsud clan—banking on the fact that if he’d actually kidnapped Mortenson, the authorities would hold Naimat Gul’s entire family responsible.

When Naimat Gul tried to extort money from his relatives by purporting to have abducted Mortenson, his family was irate. If it were true, it would have brought disgrace to the entire clan. But instead of ceding to Naimat Gul’s demands for hush money, his relatives called his bluff. According to Hussein Mohammed, “Naimat Gul Mahsud’s family told him, ‘If you kidnap this man, and something happens to us or our businesses, if our jobs get in trouble due to you, then we will hold you responsible.’” After reflecting on the extremely harsh payback his enraged relatives were apt to deliver, Naimat Gul backed down and abandoned his scam.

When Mortenson flew home to Montana in the summer of 1996, he had no idea Naimat Gul Mahsud claimed to have kidnapped him. Ironically, Naimat Gul had no idea Mortenson would soon make the same spurious claim of abduction—a charge that millions of Americans now accept as fact.

⁴ According to *Three Cups of Tea*, during a layover at Calcutta International Airport while flying home from Asia in September 2000, “Mortenson learned that one of his heroes, Mother Teresa, had died...and decided to try and pay her his respects.” Arriving at the Missionaries of Charity Motherhouse after the front gate was locked for the evening, he was admitted by a nun and escorted down a dark hallway to view Mother Teresa’s corpse. “She lay on a simple cot, at the center of a bright room full of flickering devotional candles. Mortenson gently nudged other bouquets aside, making room for his gaudy offering, and took a seat against a wall. The nun, backing out the door, left him alone with Mother Teresa.... ‘I sat in the corner staring at this shrouded figure,’ Mortenson says. ‘She looked so small, draped in her cloth. And I remember thinking how amazing it was that such a tiny person had such a huge effect on humanity.’...Mortenson knelt on the cool tiled floor next to Mother Teresa and placed his large palm over her small hand.” This a poignant anecdote, but it’s difficult to reconcile with the fact that Mother Teresa died on September 5, 1997, three years before Mortenson says he knelt beside her in Calcutta.

⁵ In March 2004, the American Himalayan Foundation suspended Mortenson's stipend because he'd repeatedly failed to report how he had used funds from the Hoerni/Pakistan Fund, as required by the Internal Revenue Service, despite repeated requests to do so.

⁶ <http://www.edutopia.org/greg-mortenson-webinar-archive>

⁷ <http://www.edutopia.org/greg-mortenson-webinar-archive>

⁸ There is no evidence to suggest that Kevin Fedarko was aware of the falsehoods published in *Stones into Schools*. Because of the extraordinary deadline pressure he was under, he had no opportunity to fact-check what he ghostwrote for Mortenson, nor did his job description include that responsibility. Fedarko had no choice but to accept Mortenson's word that what he and Sarfraz Khan reported to him was accurate.

⁹ At the time, CAI was in fact not registered as a "charity NGO" in Afghanistan. It wasn't registered as such until 2008 (see *Stones into Schools*, pages 296–298).

¹⁰ On Friday, April 15, 2011, CBS News announced that on Sunday, April 17, *60 Minutes* would broadcast a report casting doubt on the accuracy of Mortenson's books and raising questions about the financial practices of CAI.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/04/15/60minutes/main20054397.shtml>



About the Author

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