



Greg Mortenson chats it up with the Tahoe audience

photo by Emily Rademacher

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by Eve Quesnel

If there's one thing I heard over and over again during Greg Mortenson's inspirational evening presentation at Incline Village, it was "He seems like such a normal guy. Really, a regular Joe." I have to say, I completely agree. I found Mr. Nominated-for-the-Nobel-Peace-Prize to be quite humble and unassuming, even modest. And for a man who has turned his misfortune (a failed attempt at climbing K2) into something worthy of the Peace Prize (education in the Middle East), that says something. To date, he has built 131 schools, numerous women's centers and health projects, and educated over 58,000 children. Or at least his organization, Central Asia Institute (CAI), and the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan can claim such achievements.

Originally, I was scheduled to meet with Mr. Mortenson soon after his arrival in Tahoe, but he is notorious infamous for being late, and he was, arriving disheveled with his tattered duffle bag. I waited until the end of the evening, and even though it was near midnight, Mortenson still had ample energy, which prompted my first question.

Moonshine Ink: I noticed on your website that between your Tahoe visit and the end of the year you will be traveling to over thirty-five cities and crossing the country numerous times. How do you stay energetic and enthusiastic and keep track of it all?

Greg Mortenson: I have incredible support and a network that keeps me continually informed. I just look at my email to see where I go next. I don't have a personal assistant, but a wonderful staff, plus my mother-in-law lives only a block away. Overseas, I have what I call 'The Dirty Dozen,' half of whom are illiterate, but I follow them around and they help me with everything. I also count on people like Erin (Erin Casey, Executive Director of Squaw Valley Institute) to take care of me when I arrive and keep me organized throughout the venue.

MI: What advice do you have for new college graduates who are beginning to make their way in the world, especially during this economically unstable time?

GM: Make yourself a strong person. What I mean is only you can fix yourself. Find a calling and

feel passionate about what you're doing. I also advise three things. Number one: listen. Number two: listen. And number three: listen. If you want to go out in the world and make a difference, listen to the people. What do *they* want? For example, when the 2005 earthquake hit Pakistan and killed 78,000 people, others were quick to send aid. But Pakistan received tents that mostly burned because they cooked in their tents. They said, "We can make our own tents." Clearly, they would have done a better job. They also received a lot of clothes, but do you know what they did with them? They burned them. They burned tweed jackets, bras, sweaters, all sorts of clothing. And I saw the funniest thing. A sheep was 'wearing' a puffy blue down jacket on its rear end because it was more important to keep the sheep warm. Do you know what they really needed? They needed kerosene.

MI: You've met with many leaders around the world. What qualities, do you believe, make a good leader?

GM: I've met a lot of amazing people and I believe there are four traits to a successful leader. One: being able to think out of the box. Two: not being afraid to take risks. Three: not being afraid to fail. Four: working hard and being persistent and patient.

MI: What keeps you up at night?

GM: The fact that we aren't incorporating enough local solutions. Some locals may say "We can make brooms. There's straw everywhere and this will give us jobs." Or one group of people told me that they could make ceramic stoves with mud bottoms. You need to get local buy-in, build relationships. In our projects, the locals provide free land and free labor; they provide sweat equity. Currently, 30 percent of our schools are running on their own.

MI: What do you do for fun? Do you climb anymore?

GM: I hang out with my family. We go hiking and on bike rides and our family plays music together. When I'm home in Bozeman, my wife and I have a date night every Tuesday; no matter what else is planned we make sure to have our date. And Saturday is kids' day when I spend time with my daughter and son. No, I don't climb anymore. I've had too many friends die in the mountains and now I have a family and I don't want to take that risk.

MI: Since you live in a mountain town like we do, how does nature fit into your life?

GM: Some people need to plug in to take a break or feel at peace; I need to unplug. I have to be in nature. I feel that we have gotten away from being sensitive to nature, being in tune to its rhythms because we are always in control of our environment. In Afghanistan, they have little control over environment, which forces them to be intuitive.

MI: Why do you believe CAI has succeeded?

GM: A lot of nonprofits' missions dissolve because they don't stay focused. They start one thing, then go on to another, then to another. CAI primarily focuses on girls' education. You need to stay focused on your mission. Also, up until 2002 I micromanaged and I wasn't taking care of myself. People get burned out. You need to take care of yourself and hire a director and other help.

MI: How much longer do you plan to be with CAI?

GM: I plan to do this for the rest of my life, but mostly as a fundraiser. In three to four years I will turn this over to another person.

For a review of Greg Mortenson's New York Times Bestseller, "Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace...One School at a Time," click [here](#) to read our review.

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