

Social Justice Network

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REFLECTION

I just finished reading Greg Mortenson's latest book, *Stones into Schools*, and thought of the 120 million school-aged children around the globe who are deprived of an education because of gender discrimination, poverty, religious fanaticism, and corrupt governments. "It is my hope and prayer," writes Greg, "that over the next decade we will do everything in our power to achieve universal literacy and provide education for all these children, two-thirds of whom are girls. Nothing would please me more than if *Stones into Schools* became a catalyst to reach this goal."

Greg's book takes up where his *Three Cups of Tea* leaves off and is an incredible and inspiring story of his mission to build schools, with an emphasis on girls, in Northern Afghanistan. The book leaves you with a profound insight into, and an appreciation of the Afghan people and their culture, their courage in the face of seemingly impossible odds. The story also gives a badly needed insight into the importance of education as opposed to war in fighting terrorism. Greg believes that education is a more effective way to bring peace and prosperity to the peoples of Afghanistan than is war. He has built 155 schools across Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan offering an education that stands diametrically opposed to the radical Madrassa all-boys schools run by the extremists who promote terrorism.

What is significant about Greg Mortenson is

that he listens with respect in each community he visits, by invitation, to what the people want. Greg is a partner with the Islamic people in his endeavours – never an imposer or a power over. He doesn't bring in an army to impose our idea of democracy; he always respects their religion and way of life; he never brings in foreign corporations to make a profit building the schools. Greg gets the supplies and materials needed to build schools and provide teachers, but it is the people who do the building. His foundation raises the money, and as word spreads about his work, Americans especially have been more than generous. Children from 4,500 schools in the US and abroad are fascinated by his stories and raise pennies to help build schools for the children of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In the midst of so much terrorism, war, and violence in our world, Greg Mortenson's vision, courage, insight, and compassion are leaving their mark across the mountains of Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their peoples, too, are receiving an education in peace building.

As we approach the Easter season, I think of Jesus' words at the Last Supper: 'My peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you ... not as the world gives peace.' Greg Mortenson is about Christ's peace as opposed to the world's attempt to bring peace through war and violence.

***What can be better than a future world made safe
for all of us by education?***

– Jason B. Nicholson, US Army veteran, Afghanistan

INFORMATION

Curing the causes of injustice in our world is a necessary preliminary to achieving peace.

The headline of the Pope's message for the World Day of Peace on January 1, 2010, was "***If you want to Cultivate Peace, Protect the Environment***". According to Doug Roche, lifelong conservative and retired senator, Benedict XVI's vision "is sorely absent in the conduct of the Canadian government today" (*Prairie Messenger, Jan. 13, 2010*).

The **increase** in Canada's **defence budget in 2009 alone was \$1 billion**, which Roche says is more than the entire budget for the environment. I wonder how many Canadians ever reflect on the reality that weapons of war are one of the biggest contributors to both violence and environmental degradation.

Canadians who hold on to the fiction that we are a country devoted to global peace-building and security need to become more aware that war is big business and that Canada is deeply immersed in the arms trade.

I was stunned to learn recently that Canada's military exports to countries with troops fighting in major armed conflicts from 2003 to 2006 totalled **\$6,867,786,768**. The Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DEFAIT) has made the ludicrous claim that "a key priority of Canada's foreign policy is the maintenance of peace and security." What blatant hypocrisy!

Last May, Defence Minister Peter McKay chose the annual CANSEC arms exhibition in Ottawa to announce that despite the global meltdown, Canada's government would guarantee spending **\$60**

billion on new military hardware and that Canada's annual military budget of **\$419 billion** would be increased by **\$30 billion** by 2027 (Peter Sanders, *CCPA Monitor*, March 2010).

This means huge profits for the military/ industrial corporations who dance all the way to the banks while Canadians accept a budget that tells ordinary citizens they can expect no salary increases, and nothing for the environment or social services because of the recession. Just try to imagine if the money given by our government for war weapons were used for the things that build peace and not war – like the schools Greg builds, housing for the poor, health care, social services.

Never be duped, as the government would like us to be, into thinking that weapons are an essential part of our security. The families of innocent people killed by our weapons of war learn to hate us and hatred breeds more violence that will have repercussions for us.

It is no wonder I found Greg Mortenson's book so inspiring. After my research on Canada's war machine, here is a man with a vision of peace. Here is a man who, though never looking for it, has won the respect of nations and even the US military for what he has achieved in Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan. He has done more for the cause of real peace in these countries than the armies of Alexander the Great, the Soviet Union, the USA and Canada. He is not about power, control, or monetary gain. He risks his life to free others to work for peace and security in their own country. Greg is a wise, humble, ordinary American who asks nothing in return for his selfless dedication to sowing the seeds of peace through education.

Sometimes the acts of one individual can illuminate how to confront a foreign-policy dilemma more clearly than the prattle of politicians. Such is the case with Greg Mortenson, whose work gives insights into an essential element of fighting terrorism. – Trudy Rubin, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

FACTS

One of the primary features of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1996-2001) was depriving girls and women of education. When it captured Kabul, there was an immediate suspension of “106,256 elementary school girls, more than 8,000 female university students and 7,793 female teachers lost their jobs” (*Stones into Schools*, Greg Mortenson).

At the height of the Taliban’s power in 2000, fewer than 800,000 children were enrolled in schools – all of them boys – and today, student enrolment across the country is approaching **8 million children, 2.4 million of whom are girls** (ibid).

“Greg ... believes that if Afghanistan has any chance to become a prosperous nation, it will require the **full engagement of its women** in the process, and for that to happen, women have to be given access to schools” (Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*).

The Canadian government has handed out billions in grants, unpaid loans and investments to subsidize this country’s already highly-profitable war industries (Richard Sanders, *CCPA Monitor*, March 2010).

Canada ships military exports to countries around the world with troops fighting major armed conflicts (ibid). There will never be peace in the Middle East as long as we allow injustice to prevail.

Canada’s Prime Minister, the strongest pro-Israel leader in the Western world, harms the cause of justice and peace by his one-sided approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His policy suggests that a Palestinian child is not as important as an Israeli child - even though God made them both.

The cost of **one** Tomahawk cruise missile tipped with a Raytheon guidance system is about **\$800,000**. For that much money, you could build dozens of schools that could provide tens of thousands of students with a balanced, non-extremist education over the course of a generation (Greg Mortenson).

Both the Afghanistan and the Iraqi wars have been a boon to the arms industry. For example, Lockheed Martin Corporation produces F/A-22 fighter jets with a price tag of **\$200 million** each.

It staggers the imagination to consider what the enormous sums spent on nuclear weapons could have done for education, health, and other requisites for development of peoples everywhere. – Doug Roche

ACTION

I suggest that you read the full article by Richard Sanders - 'Canadian gov't heavily subsidizing our military companies'. See the GSIC web site: [greysisters.ca/engagingwithourworld/current issues/](http://greysisters.ca/engagingwithourworld/current%20issues/).

I would highly recommend that you read *Stones into Schools* by Greg Mortenson. It is in hardback now but will be out in paperback in a few months. Recommend it to a friend and/or donate a copy to a high school library, or give it to someone as a gift.

If you are a teacher or parent, you might want to look into the *Pennies for Peace* web site www.penniesforpeace.org which has inspiring ways of getting children involved in helping raise pennies for pencils or for a teacher's salary which

averages \$1.50 a day. It would also be an education for them to learn about other children who have so much less than they do.

"Just as wars begin in the minds of men, peace also begins in our minds."

- Seville Statement on Violence

We live in a country conditioned to violence. Most people think they are non-violent, but we accept the use of violence when we do not speak out against the policies in our country that export war and violence to other countries.

In what areas of violence have you allowed your mind to be dulled?

Books are making much more of a difference in Afghanistan than bombs.

PRAYER

God, you gave us your gift of peace at your Last Supper and never intended that we should betray that peace through war and violence. At creation you gave us the beauty of the human person and the beauty of the natural world and you never intended your creations to be destroyed by weapons of mass destruction.

As we approach Good Friday, let us remember all those across our world who are being destroyed by violence and war; and as we celebrate Easter, let us celebrate your gift of peace and do all in our power to contribute to that peace in our families, in our communities, in our churches, and in speaking out against those government policies that promote war and violence in our world. Amen.

Easter blessings to each of you, and may we see the suffering Christ of Good Friday in the people in our world who are victims of war and violence and strive to be the light of the resurrected Christ to all God's peoples.

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