The Strength of Mortenson Post a Tragedy
When the world experiences an enormous historical event such as the tragedy that took place on September 11, 2001, it is impossible to forget the events that day had entailed. I began my morning that day like any other and woke up for a normal school day. It was my third period gym class when I had first heard of the attacks on the twin towers. Molly, who had arrived late to school due to a dentist appointment, had heard the news on the radio in the car while the rest of us were in school. The very next class period, an emergency meeting was called to which we were all informed that we were being sent home as a national security procedure. The school cafeteria served all of the student free cookies for a little comfort food as we waited for our rides to arrive.

Everyone has his own version of what he was doing on that sad day. Greg Mortenson, the co-founder and Executive Director of the Central Asia Institute, was greatly affected by this day in a more personal manner than most other Americans. While the subsequent events of this day may have caused others to give up on a task as difficult as Mortenson’s, it only further motivated him to continue his mission and helped prove his cause worthy.

Greg Mortenson, who was in Pakistan at the time, was not informed of the terrorist attack that took place that day until 4:30 a.m. on September 12, 2001. Mortenson had been awoken by his bodyguard, Faisal Baig with the words, “A village called New York has been bombed” (253). With Al Qaeda, an Islamic terrorist group, responsible for the attacks of 9/11, Mortenson’s mission instantly became affected.

The actions of AL Qaeda had zero affect on Mortenson’s perception of them. Mortenson knew who these people were and ignored the stereotypes of all Muslims being terrorists. Syed Abbas, the religious leader of northern Pakistan’s Shia Muslims, gave a
speech in honor of his American friends and all that they had done for the Muslims the
day after the attacks. In response to this speech, Mortenson stated, “The true tenants of
Islam are justice, tolerance, and charity, and Syed Abbas represented the moderate center
of Muslim faith eloquently” (257).

Surprisingly, it was the people of his own country, the victims of 9/11 that
disappointed Mortenson. When Mortenson returned a month after the attacks after
finishing a few jobs in Pakistan, he came home to a mailbox of hate mail. Americans
deemed him a traitor for helping the attackers of his own country. While he received very
few letters of support at this time, most made threats against his life including a Denver
postmarked letter stating, “I wish some of our bombs had hit you because you’re
counterproductive to our military efforts” (275). A person would be lying if he claimed
that this was not bothersome. Mortenson claimed, “for the first time since starting my
work in Pakistan, I thought about quitting” (275). Instead of quitting, Mortenson used the
events of 9/11 as an example of why his work is so necessary and important.

Mortenson decided to arrange speeches where he attempting to support his cause
and gain approval from Americans. His speeches were designed to inform people about
the Muslim culture and the hardships of regions within Pakistan and Afghanistan to
reduce their stereotypical opinions. After highly influencing congresswoman Mary Bono,
she scheduled Mortenson to speak in front of the Congress in Washington D.C. The main
point of Mortenson’s presentation was to make his purpose very clear. When asked how
building schools helps America’s national security, Mortenson replied, “I’ve learned that
terror doesn’t happen because some group of people somewhere like Pakistan or
Afghanistan simply decide to hate us. It happens because children aren’t being offered a bright enough future that they have a reason to choose life over death” (292).

A few months later, Mortenson was invited to speak at the Pentagon. Here, he made it very clear that he believed in the war in Afghanistan when he thought it would rebuild the country. However, he wanted to make sure that the United States was willing to take the steps following war to make this reconstruction. Once his speech was completed, Mortenson was offered a large amount of money from the military to support his cause. By respectfully denying, Mortenson demonstrated that his relationship with the people of the Middle Eastern countries was important. “I realized that my credibility in that part of the world depended on me not being associated with the American government” (295).

Though Mortenson had not been able to build schools in Afghanistan prior to 9/11 due to the instability of the country, he believed that after the attacks was as good of a time as ever. Mortenson made a personal trip to the country to see the possibilities his support would provide. While in the country, the Mortenson’s group of Americans failed to see the progress that the United States had promised. One woman had stated, “Where is the aid? I’d heard so much about what America had promised Afghanistan’s people while I was home—how rebuilding the country was one of our top priorities. But being there, and seeing so little evidence of help for Afghanistan’s children. Particularly from the United States, was really embarrassing and frustrating for me” (288-289). While in Afghanistan, Mortenson provided books and supplies to schools as well as paying teachers who had not received paychecks for months.
Soon, those who had known and worked with Mortenson were spreading the story of his efforts. Eventually, Lamar Graham, the managing editor of Parade magazine, became moved by Mortenson’s efforts. On April 6, 2002, Mortenson had finally reached out to millions of people when his article, “He Fights Terror With Books,” from Parade magazine hit newspapers nationwide. Parade’s editor in chief stated, “Greg’s story created one of the most powerful reader responses in Parade’s sixty-four years of publishing” (301). Two days later, Mortenson opened his P.O. box to find eighty letters stuffed inside. Four days later, Mortenson received five canvas sacks of letters in which only one letter contained a negative response. Americans had made the CAI their charity of choice from which they accumulated more than one million dollars. Mortenson had finally accomplished gaining approval from Americans in a way that it repaired the pain he felt for receiving the death threats directly after 9/11. Mortenson stated, “I felt like America had spoken” (302). The support encouraged Mortenson to work more than ever, and so he did.

It was post 9/11 that Mortenson accomplished some of his greatest work. Within a year after Parade had released its article, Mortenson finished nineteen schools to have a total of more than forty schools within the Pakistani regions. Mortenson then went on to begin work in Afghanistan. “As of 2009, he had established eighty-one schools, including fifteen new schools in Afghanistan, and additional schools in regions of Azad Kashmir, Pakistan, that were devastated in a 2005 earthquake” (332).

It is amazing to think that someone could use 9/11 as incentive to do something as remarkable as what Greg Mortenson has accomplished. Mortenson was able to overcome ridicule and become a role model to all. His determination has helped so many
individuals and it is truly inspiring. His accomplishments show how much a single person is capable of. Some believe that Mortenson will be the winner of a Nobel Peace Prize somewhere down the road, which would be truly deserved. The CAI continues to pursue its mission and will as long as necessary.