

# Let's learn from Mortenson's mistakes

Three years ago, author and humanitarian Greg Mortenson visited Jackson Hole at the invitation of the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs, Interconnections 21 and the Teton County Library Foundation. His topic was his crusade to build schools for girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as recounted in his best-selling book, "Three Cups of Tea."

This spring, we were all surprised to hear news reports detailing improprieties in Mortenson's finances and inaccuracies in his accounts of these experiences.

At about the same time as these revelations were coming to light, I happened to be watching a PBS program about John Muir. One of the program's themes was trust — Muir's trust of nature and his credibility with communicating his message of wilderness conservation. This quality of Muir's presents an interesting contrast with Mortenson and one worth pondering in our civic-minded community.

When Mortenson spoke to a packed crowd at Snow King, I introduced him as a "man of the mountains." Muir, too, was described in the PBS program as a "mountain man." But there the similarities apparently end.

Muir drew his inspiration from nature. Because he knew and understood nature, he trusted it. This trust, in turn, inspired others to trust him. They knew that he knew what he was doing, and they trusted him to show them how nature could be their own teacher.

Mortenson, a person of enormous personal commitment, operates in the world of charitable good works. Yet there apparently is little about this world that he knows or understands. He and his nonprofit organization, the Central Asia Institute, have intermingled institutional and Mortenson's personal funds. There hasn't been proper management or accounting for the use of these funds. How can donors to the Central Asia Institute now be assured that their charitable contributions will actually be used in the way they thought they were intended?

Mortenson's audience in Jackson Hole knows this world of nonprofits well. We are a uniquely generous community, and, as we have done so often with our own organizations, we opened our wallets to his. It is no wonder that we now feel betrayed. Yet, even as we draw back from his example, there are lessons we can learn from it.

First, self-promotion has its limits. Mortenson has tirelessly — shamelessly, some might now say — promoted his books and school-building efforts, raising tens of millions of dollars. As the contributions poured in from book tours and lectures, and as his fee for each of these appearances increased to 15 times that charged for his April 2008 visit to Jackson Hole, each new contribution seemed to count for less. Fifty schools ... 100 ... 150 ... who even cares? Fundraising almost seemed to become an end in itself.

We, too, in the valley have had our share of the fundraising feeding frenzy. One rarely opens a letter from a community nonprofit without finding inside a self-addressed contribution form. Results of large endowment campaigns — raising funds to match challenge grants — are tallied and touted with the hype of a high school football game. A little more face-to-face engagement with prospective supporters and less in-your-face boosterism could go a long way.

Another lesson from the Mortenson experience is to avoid getting ahead of ourselves. According to a "60 Minutes" report, many of the schools the Central Asia Institute claimed to have built or helped build were standing empty or being used for storage. Clearly, the scramble to erect new buildings got out ahead of the concern for quality control — the need to properly equip, staff and maintain existing facilities.

There are many ways nonprofit organizations can get out ahead of themselves. Several years ago, there was an organization in Jackson Hole that grew very rapidly, became overextended with glossy productions and promotions and then collapsed of its own weight in the recession. This was a disservice to all who had invested their hopes in it.

Finally, we need to beware of turf wars and the dangers of going it alone. Wouldn't it have been to Mortenson's own and others' advantage if, at a certain point, he could have decided to devote some considerable portion of his energies and efforts to sharing his expertise and experience with others? In Jackson Hole alone, there are many such efforts focused on Bhutan, Cambodia, Mexico, Sierra Leone and Tanzania. Think how much they could have benefited — and how much more global good could have been done — if Mortenson could have been as concerned with the success of these efforts as his own.

Here in Jackson Hole, there are many organizations, including my own, that overlap with others working on similar issues. That doesn't mean they need to consolidate their efforts, but it does leave plenty of room for collaboration. Through partnerships, each can bring its different strengths to a common effort. The whole should never be less — and can sometimes be greater — than the sum of the parts.

John Muir was a visionary, but also a practical man of affairs who trusted nature and his own instincts. Mortenson is a visionary whose work has changed the lives of thousands of young women in a war-torn land. But he has demonstrated limited practical understanding relative to the world of philanthropy, through which visions are translated into reality. In the end, he hasn't kept faith with his supporters. We in Jackson Hole can learn from his mistakes to do an even better job of delivering nonprofit services to the community.

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## GUEST SHOT

David Wendt