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Dangers of hero worship

Heidi Schlumpf | May. 24, 2011

Greg Mortenson speaks in Carmel, Calif. in September 2009. (Newscom/ZUMA Press)

When author Greg Mortenson visited Aurora University in Illinois this spring, he spoke to a sold-out crowd crammed into the university?s largest auditorium and overflowing into a second theater, where a video streamed the event live. But even those of us who had to watch it the following week on our computer screens could make out the backdrop of banners proclaiming the school?s core values, including the word ?Integrity? right behind Mortenson?s head.

It made for a bit of irony a few weeks later when clips from that speech ended up as part of a ?60 Minutes? piece that alleged multiple inconsistencies in Mortenson?s best-selling *Three Cups of Tea: One Man?s Mission to Promote Peace ... One School at a Time*, as well as fiscal mismanagement of his nonprofit foundation, the Central Asia Institute.

In the book, which has sold 4 million copies and is required reading for U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Mortenson describes how he was nursed back to health by local tribespeople in northern Pakistan after failing to summit K2, the second-tallest mountain on Earth. He promises the village he will return to build a school for children and eventually founds a charity that has built more than 140 schools, primarily for Muslim girls.

I required *Three Cups of Tea* in an intercultural communication class this spring, and the class watched the video of Mortenson?s campus talk. The students loved the book, even a few who had admitted they had reservations about it. It was the perfect vehicle for discussing cultural differences, communication styles and possible intercultural misunderstandings.

The book?s title refers to the Pakistani saying that emphasizes the importance of relationship in that culture: After one cup of tea together, you?re strangers; after two, friends; after three, family. Mortenson humbly shares his failure to grasp this and other important cultural lessons, even though he had lived in Africa as a child with his missionary parents.

In fact, if there?s one quality about Mortenson that comes through the pages and across in person it?s his humility. My students picked up on his lack of ego right away, and it gave him credibility. They were open to Mortenson?s views -- even those they might normally disagree with -- because he admitted his own failures

(mountaineering, financial, organizational and even romantic), eschewed material things, gave credit to others and preferred to stay out of the spotlight.

So they, like many others, were shocked when the allegations about him surfaced. Sensing a teachable moment, I showed the ?60 Minutes? segment in class to prompt a discussion. Some refused to believe any of it. A few business majors pointed out that many companies pad their expenses; others argued that the ethical bar is higher for charities and nonprofits.

A number of lessons could be learned from this still-unfolding drama, including some for future public relations and journalism professionals. For example, don?t try to hide from the ?60 Minutes? camera crew; it only makes you look guilty. Also, journalists should not trust secondary information (fellow mountaineer/author Jon Krakauer quotes one of Mortenson?s climbing partners, who later says he was misquoted or at least misinterpreted).

But might there be broader, even spiritual, lessons too?

Despite his humility, Mortenson?s book, speeches and charity are ultimately centered on him. I doubt hundreds would have packed Aurora University?s auditorium to hear coauthor David Oliver Relin or even a graduate from one of Mortenson?s schools. Mortenson is the main character, indeed the hero, of the book.

Enter the danger of the cult of personality. After the Mortenson allegations, many commentators pointed out that any time one person?s story becomes famous, there?s a danger of these ?personalities? starting to believe their own hype and to think the rules of society don?t apply to them.

We have seen it over and over again with entertainment celebrities, businesspeople, politicians and world leaders. Sad to say, we also have cults of personality in our church -- on both sides of the ideological spectrum. In fact, you can quickly identify which way a Catholic leans by who their heroes or heroines are: Mother Angelica, or Joan Chittister? Fr. John Corapi, or Fr. Roy Bourgeois? Padre Pio, or Oscar Romero?

Of course, in today?s world, everyone has something of a public platform: the Internet. Blogging, tweeting and ?personal branding? are almost requirements for any quasi-public figure, if not all job seekers. With these public personas, any person can theoretically fall prey to the pitfalls of the cult of personality.

But those of us whose fame still starts with a lower-case letter are usually guiltier of propagating personality cults as fans of those with capital-F Fame. As I write this, half the world is obsessed with a recent royal wedding; the other half is obsessed with the canonization of a late pope. I?m not saying Kate and William or John Paul II aren?t deserving of massive interest. In fact, the church uses the language of ?public cult? in reference to saints.

As humans, we love stories. That?s why Jesus told parables, and why his own story has fascinated for centuries. Let?s just be sure to put our worship where it belongs -- on God.

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