

The Places in Between

Rory Stewart

Curriculum Unit
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Introduction

The Places in Between provides a fascinating glimpse into Afghanistan as Rory Stewart experienced it during his 2002 trek across the country, part of the long hike that also took him into Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, and India. The journey through Afghanistan took place in 2002, just months after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City and shortly after the Taliban lost official power. Stewart, a Scotsman, describes his difficulties beginning in Herat, the people and experiences along the way, and his arrival in Kabul.

Despite its prevalence in world news, most students can barely visualize Afghanistan, which they dimly associate with terrorism, war, and Osama bin Laden. This book introduces a country with an ancient and rich culture, ravaged by Russian invasion and Muslim extremists, and plagued with instability. Stewart describes terrifying encounters with officialdom as well as hospitality, sometimes extended reluctantly, by villagers in remote areas.

This book is nonfiction, but it tells a good story and is an excellent choice for high school students. It enlarges their worldview and helps to transcend stereotypes and oversimplifications. It can be an excellent companion piece in a study of Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. Understanding is the one tool that can help to bridge the cultural chasm between people in the Western world and the largely uneducated and poverty-stricken Afghans.

Why would anyone choose to hike thousands of miles across Asia? Even Stewart finds it hard to answer that question. Perhaps the answer is that the only way to really know a place is to walk through it. Flying over it and driving through it do not achieve the same results. The more hardy and adventuresome among us seem to value arduous physical challenges such as hiking the entire Appalachian Trail or cycling across Europe to the Olympics.

The book tells the story of a real person who demonstrated physical stamina, determination, and bravery in sometimes terrifying circumstances. It also portrays Afghans' attitudes toward one another and toward the outside world. Students are certain to be amazed by Stewart's experiences.

Lesson 5

Cultural Antiquities of Afghanistan

Objectives

- To understand events in part 4 of *The Places in Between*
- To learn about minarets and their purpose
- To learn about laws regarding cultural antiquities

Notes to the Teacher

Much of the first half of part 4 focuses on antiquities near the minaret of Jam. Rory Stewart describes coming upon and exploring the minaret itself and goes on to discuss the impact of untrained diggers excavating and selling artifacts. One casualty of this is the loss of important data to analyze anthropological history in the area. (Note: Since 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] has sponsored legitimate archaeological excavations at Jam, including structural repairs to preserve the eight-hundred-year-old minaret. For more information on the minaret of Jam, consult the Internet.) The men with whom Stewart talked had little interest in cultural history; they were digging to find artifacts to sell. The illegal antiquities market exists worldwide despite national and international laws intended to preserve cultural history. While the poor laborers who dig up the artifacts receive only paltry payments, dealers make huge profits on the merchandise.

The rest of the section presents Stewart's experiences heading toward the territory of the Hazara. We see effects of recent violence, including a twelve-year-old boy on a mission to find his father. Throughout this part of the journey, Stewart suffered from intestinal problems, and Babur, too, became ill, but the two manage to resume their trek eastward.

In this lesson, students discuss events and people described in part 4 of the book. They then focus on the world of cultural property.

Procedure

1. Read aloud Stewart's description of his slip inside the minaret, which is presented on the same pages as the sketches of the minaret and an Afghan man. If possible, use the Internet to show students a picture of the minaret of Jam. Ask students the following questions:
 - What is a minaret? (Minarets are tall, narrow towers typically attached to a mosque. Five times a day muezzins ascend minarets to summon people to prayer. Minarets are therefore both useful structures and symbolic of religious faith.)

- What does the existence of the minaret of Jam indicate about the past of this deep, narrow valley? (Minarets are attached to mosques, so there must have been a community large enough to build the magnificent structure and to gather in prayer. The findings of the diggers and Stewart's observations suggest that this unfriendly habitat was the home of many generations of cultures.)
2. Distribute **Handout 11**, and ask small groups to discuss and answer the questions.

Suggested Responses

1. Stewart's experiences show his curiosity about cultural history, his recognition that the hike across Asia could cost his life, and his ability to get along well with total strangers.
 2. The Turquoise Mountain is the site of the minaret of Jam, long ago a prosperous trading center.
 3. One of the men mentions that the Turquoise Mountain was once destroyed by a hailstorm and then destroyed a second time by the marauding Genghis Khan. Stewart means that their haphazard digging is destroying the site once again. The men find that comment amusing.
 4. The diggers have no interest in mapping the towns that once existed there or in differentiating cultures. It is evident that people lived in mud houses, some very small, that games like chess were popular, and that the people were burned out, probably by the armies of Genghis Khan.
 5. Dr. Paende is a well-to-do veterinarian who hosts Stewart. The doctor's brother was shot when his vehicle was mistaken for one belonging to an enemy of the shooters.
 6. The boy attended school in Pakistan, which he liked very much, but was summoned back to Afghanistan by his father, who was in trouble with Ismail Khan.
 7. Stewart evidently feels a kind of relief at being with English-speaking people. The British soldiers think he is crazy; the Red Cross people help him but are very busy.
3. Ask students to describe the situation at the end of book 4. (Stewart and Babur, both ill, are about to continue their journey.)
4. Point out that much of part 4 is concerned with cultural property, an important and sometimes controversial subject all over the world. In the United States, for example, archaeologists sometimes want to excavate ancient Native American burial sites but encounter understandable objections to the idea of digging up people's ancestors and violating the graves.

5. Distribute **Handout 12**, and ask students to read the information. Then conduct a discussion based on the questions.

Suggested Responses

1. The diggers have little interest in cultural history; they do observe a fondness for games, mud houses, and evidence of fire. Stewart is more observant and notices evidence of a variety of cultures interacting—Chinese, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Hindu, Manichaeian.
 2. Stewart recognizes the hard work the men have done and the sacrifices involved in living in this inhospitable valley, but he also regrets the destructive effects of unplanned and unsupervised excavation of an important archaeological site. We see him as someone profoundly interested in history and also knowledgeable about international import/export businesses.
 3. The artifacts belong to the history of Afghanistan, so the diggers really are looters who have been exploited by the import/export business. What might earn a digger a few dollars could net a fortune for a shrewd dealer.
6. Assign students to read part 5.

Afghanistan's Cultural Values

Directions: Having read all of *The Places in Between*, you are ready to discuss the values evident in traditional Afghan culture—the things that the rest of the world could benefit to learn from a country little understood by most people in Europe and the Americas. Fill in the chart with your interpretations.

Observation	Interpretation
1. Every night during his walk across Afghanistan, Rory Stewart received shelter and food from people who did not know him.	
2. The men in the villages responded to calls to prayer five times a day.	
3. Some of the women wore burqas, while others were veiled and/or wore small hats to cover most of their hair.	
4. In many of the homes, meals consisted of little more than rice, bread, and tea.	
5. The villages between Herat and Kabul had no electricity and therefore none of the modern conveniences we often take for granted.	
6. In his days traveling across the country and staying in guest rooms or mosques, Stewart saw few interactions among family members.	
7. Many of the Afghan men along the way were armed with Kalashnikovs.	