

UPDATED &
SLIMBOOKIFIED

ALMOST

— *ISN'T* —

GOOD ENOUGH

"Wayne is a perfect example of how anyone can use their influence to incite positive change in the world."

Jeff Fisher, Head Coach of NFL's St. Louis Rams

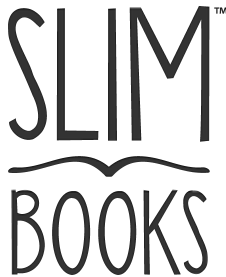
A SlimBook by Wayne Elsey
A Corporate Executive Turned Social Entrepreneur

SLIM
BOOKS

Almost Isn't Good Enough

*Lessons Learned from a Corporate Executive
Turned Social Entrepreneur*

A SlimBook by **Wayne Elsey**



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Foreword

There is a line in one of the prophets that haunts the reader: “How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news.” Feet were not generally considered beautiful in the ancient world. They were not big into sidewalks, which meant everybody’s feet were constantly being covered with mud and dirt and worse. Washing feet was menial labor, a job for slaves. Jesus washed feet. Jesus was the one who carried good news. Jesus had beautiful feet.

In our day, where I live, people don’t give a lot of thought to feet, or to shoes for that matter (outside of *Sex and the City* fans). I had always more or less taken them for granted. That is, until I met Wayne.

Wayne Elsey, for those of you who have not yet had the fortune of meeting him, is one of those larger-than-life characters. The story of his rise to success in the shoe industry with (to say the least) not much experience is something out of a movie. The story of how, as a young boy, he came to discover that he might have something worthwhile to offer to the world, enough to stick around for a few more years, is even more riveting.

But the most compelling thing about Wayne is not Wayne. It’s feet. In one of those unlikely, I-was-not-looking-for-it moments, somebody spoke to Wayne. Somebody who cares about the poor was going to ask Wayne to make a difference and give him a passion and sense of meaning to boot. (Slight footwear pun, I know.) Somebody who sounded suspiciously like God, if God can use a TV to speak to somebody.

And Wayne went from being a man with a resume to a man with a mission. He did not lose any of his old fire, drive, impatience, or demand for results. Instead, he channeled all that energy toward the enhancement of human beings who do not have enough money for a simple pair of shoes and are left with the risk of infection, disease, discomfort, disfigurement, or any number of conditions that those of us who are easily-shod never have to think about.

You have a chance to “meet” Wayne in this book. I want you to imagine that you are talking with a soft-spoken, well-heeled, carefully coiffed man who looks exactly like George Clooney. Only, you should know that Wayne is nothing like the image in your mind right now.

Meeting Wayne means getting a scent of the passion that drives him, and you can't get a whiff of it without wanting some yourself. But, if he were speaking to you right now, he would tell you that what matters is not that you meet him. His story is not really his story, after all.

What matters is that maybe, just maybe, the same One who spoke to Wayne some time ago about the suffering and hurting and lacking in this world might speak through Wayne to you as well. And maybe your life will become larger than your life too.

It's about the shoes, but it's really not about the shoes. It's about the people who wear them.

–**John Ortberg**, *Senior Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, speaker, and author of numerous books such as **When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box; The Life You've Always Wanted; and The Me I Want to Be.***

Introduction

Shoe Is a Four-Letter Word . . . So Is Hope

I remember the first time I stepped into Mrs. Busch's classroom. It was my sophomore year of high school, and she was my homeroom teacher. Mrs. Busch had already been teaching nearly a decade by the time our paths intersected. I immediately knew something was different about her.

I'll never forget a girl in our class who was constantly late to school. School policy called for a suspension after collecting three tardies, and there was no room for interpretation. This girl was due to feel the full weight of her circumstance when Mrs. Busch slid a quarter across her student desk and suggested she call her mother to inform the school that her tardiness was due to not feeling well. This girl didn't immediately connect the dots. In fact, it took my classmate hearing Mrs. Busch's suggestion three times before fully understanding the compassionate plea and redemptive opportunity that was being provided to her. Mrs. Busch cared about her students. More importantly, she cared about me.

A Haunting Accusation

I was a teenager tired of school and ready to graduate. Screaming for my own identity and sense of self, I never really felt like I fit anywhere. I was tall, lanky, and felt forgotten and overlooked. Raised in a blended family, I was the youngest of four.

I had many friends and was well liked, so I don't mean to suggest that I was a recluse or anti-social. Still, those teenage years are full of self-doubt, overcome with questions, and fueled by a level of energy that can hardly be contained within the confines of home and school. For me, it didn't help when one teacher told me I wouldn't amount to anything. I don't remember all the details surrounding the event, but I can hear those words as clearly today as I did back then.

We have little idea how what we say affects others. He never knew it, but his accusation would haunt me for years to come. I was determined to prove him wrong.

I remember one time in particular when I was struggling to discern up from down. It was one of those days when nothing seemed to be going right and every turn delivered another unanticipated and unwelcomed surprise. Mrs. Busch knew something was bothering me. She was very perceptive and easily read between the lines.

We talked, and I told her everything. I'll never forget what she said: "Wayne, you can do anything you want to do. Just do it." That was the first time in my life someone told me I could do whatever I wanted to do. Finally, I was given permission to dream big and make something happen. Mrs. Busch's words resonated within me and fueled my desire to prove the other teacher wrong, and every critic of mine going forward.

You Can Do Anything You Want to Do

Those words may not seem special or extraordinary, but they became the cadence of my career. From an early age, I felt empowered knowing that what was most important was my decision to take action and do something rather than sit, wait, think, and plan. My willingness to work hard—not what others allowed me to do—would turn my dreams into reality.

I remember selling fruitcakes in the subways of Washington, D.C. The 4-H club was selling each fruitcake for four dollars. I determined they were highly undervaluing the product, so I decided to sell the same fruitcakes for five dollars. I sold every fruitcake I could get my hands on that day. The exact amount of profit escapes me now, but I do know I was the only student who actually turned a profit on fruitcakes.

I didn't always make good choices. I still had to learn that every decision has a corresponding consequence. The same Mrs. Busch who unleashed my potential also gave me my first zero in class. I deserved it.

Let's just say I was tired from not sleeping much the night before, so I found a place to take a nap during one four-hour summer school class.

When I awoke, I realized I had slept through the entire class. After the other students were dismissed, I asked Mrs. Busch if I could make up what I had missed. She told me no because the reason I missed was a result of my decision, not hers. With a lot of hard work, I was still able to make an A in the class.

I believe Mrs. Busch wanted me to learn that my decisions will take me where I want to go. Her wisdom would later prove invaluable.

First Steps in the Footwear Industry

School was never difficult for me, but I wasn't a bookworm. I couldn't wait to graduate and be in the real world. Thankfully, I was part of a school-sponsored program that let me go to school for a half-day and work the other half-day. That's when I started in the shoe business. It was my first step into the industry that would shape my life.

I was only fifteen at the time, but I ran the local shoe store in town. I wasn't officially the manager, because I was a minor. Functionally, though, there wasn't a difference. I knew I was good at what I did. I never had trouble connecting with my customers, and I strived for everyone to feel as if they were the most important person in the world. It didn't matter if they were rich or poor, black or white, young or old . . . if they needed shoes, I was going to give them the best shoe experience ever. I would always sell more shoes than any other associate in the store because I didn't see a sale. I saw a person in need.

Selling shoes to women, I learned, was a lesson in the importance of knowing your customer. Women have different shoe-shopping habits than men. They often shop together. And they value small feet. It didn't take me long to become accurate at judging the size of a woman's foot without having to measure. When a customer would shop with her friends in my store, I would always grab the correct size, which was often much larger than desired, but place the pair of shoes into a box marked with a much smaller size. The customer would know it, but her friends never noticed. Selling shoes was a mere transaction. What mattered most is that I made her feel special. I didn't provide just shoes for her to wear; I built her self-esteem and offered her a sense of dignity.

People Matter

Treating the individuals who walked through the doors of my store as human beings rather than just prospects was a practice that propelled me to consistent growth in shoe sales and accelerated my career within the industry. I wish I could take credit for this decision, but I owe it all to Mrs. Busch. It was in her class that I first saw modeled what it was like to love others unconditionally and place another's needs above my own.

Mrs. Busch would never tell this about herself, but she discretely purchased a few pairs of shoes for her students over the years. She didn't let a teacher's salary stand in the way of changing someone else's life. This bent toward helping others is why I believe we connected on so many levels. I knew that when I grew up, I wanted to be Mrs. Busch to other people. I wasn't sure exactly what that would mean, but I was certain it wasn't going to be teaching in a classroom.

Mrs. Busch is one of those people who come into your life unannounced and seemingly without cause or reason. Now I know something larger was taking place. I tried to show her how special she was to me by organizing her one (and only) student-given birthday party. Through the years we've kept in touch, and I've tried to remind her how much her words of encouragement meant to me. I once sent her and her husband to see her beloved Chicago Cubs. Another time, I flew them out to Las Vegas to join me for an event Soles4Souls was hosting. It was the least I could do.

But as for most people, my life hasn't always been full of fun, games, and success. Mrs. Busch was there for me when my brother was suddenly and unexpectedly killed. She was there when my baby girl was born three months prematurely. She was there every time I needed her, and she always told me that whatever I needed, she would help however she could.

I've told her time and again that if it wasn't for her, I am certain my life would be different. She reminds me that everything I have become and achieved was because I decided to take action and do something. Whichever version of the story is true, Mrs. Busch changed my life, and I have tried to change others lives in the same way.

One Shoe Changed Everything

Decades after high school, I found myself sitting on my couch watching the news about the terrible tsunami in Indonesia. In one TV clip, I noticed a single shoe had washed up on the beach. I felt an immediate urge and compulsion to do something to help, though I had no idea what one person could do. I may have been an executive who knew how to work the sales floor and consistently improve the bottom line—but I was a beginner when it came to charity.

I thought of Mrs. Busch and the compassion she had shown me and so many others. Her statement “You can do anything you want to do” flashed through my mind. I looked to what was most familiar: the footwear industry. It seemed like a logical place to start.

I called my friends who were also corporate executives in this small, yet fiercely competitive industry in search of donations to send shoes to the survivors. Combined, we collected more than 250,000 pairs of new shoes and were able to cover the cost of shipping through monetary donations as well. I was blown away by how one act of kindness resulted in a quarter of a million shoes distributed to others in need. Judging by the surprising success of this effort, I knew I had stumbled onto something big.

Shoes are a luxury for many of us. We have multiple pairs in our closets. While most people aren't able to afford the designer names, many have the capacity to purchase a new pair of shoes at will. This is not the case for three hundred million children around the world. Some have never had a pair of shoes. Some need new shoes, but can't get them. Some need the right kind of shoe to protect themselves at worksites and provide comfort and support for their demanding jobs.

The shoe business was my business. If I could organize the donation of 250,000 pairs with a few phone calls, I wondered what I might be able to do with a more organized and thoughtful effort. Starting and funding new ventures was not a new thing for me. By this time in my life, I had learned I have the ability to create something out of nothing and improve upon what already exists.

After I left the sales floor in local shoe stores, I eventually became a change agent for another, much larger, shoe company. In underperforming stores, I would become the manager for a few months. I was able to turn around just about every store. This would be an invaluable skill that would carry me through what could arguably be the riskiest venture of my life: starting Soles4Souls.

It wasn't long after the Indonesian tsunami that the Katrina disaster hit New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas. I took what I had learned and put it to work under the name Katrina Shoes. We were able to accomplish similar results with relatively little effort. It became apparent that this little operation was not going to last as a volunteer effort. I had a decision to make. I was forty years old at the time and in my peak income-earning years. I was at the top of a very well known footwear company. Leaving my professional career behind made absolutely no sense, but I suspected from the beginning that it would be what I had to do.

My friends shared my concern and celebrated with me over the impact we already had. However, they thought I was absolutely crazy for walking away from what they believed was the job of a lifetime.

Being an executive is tough. Everything falls on your shoulders. Success and failure are yours to claim and own. There is very little about that role that isn't full of stress and expectations. It can suffocate you at times. I had proven myself as one of the best in the business, driving each and every company I led toward innovation and greater productivity and profitability. Even with every reason to leave this hobby behind, I couldn't forget the image of that single shoe I had seen on TV the day of the tsunami. I asked myself what Mrs. Busch would do. I didn't have to think long. I knew what she would have done, and I knew what I had to do. Soles4Souls had to become a full-time endeavor. It was the logical next step.

One Act of Kindness

Today, one act of kindness has become an international relief organization that has distributed more than twelve million shoes to people in need. We generated more than \$75 million in contributions and held our administrative costs to 2 percent. Our goal was to provide shoes to other people. Period. It is the simplicity of our mission and the compassion with

which we did our work that I believe set us apart from other charities and accelerated our efforts beyond our wildest imaginations.

The reality is, you don't have to be a corporate executive turned philanthropist/nonprofit leader to make a difference in the lives of others. Though this book reveals the principles upon which I live my life and the values that directed decisions while I was at Soles4Souls, everyone has the capacity to do something.

You might be a teenager filled with desires to do something that matters. You might be college student striving to understand your place in this world. You might be a young professional who quietly questions whether poring over spreadsheets and executive summaries should be the activities to which you give the best years of your life. This book is for you.

Perhaps you are a social activist, a mid-life professional looking to make a change within yourself and in the world, or even a corporate executive looking to lead your company to improve more than the bottom line. This book is for you. However, not everyone is ready to read what is written in this book.

If you're a pseudo-intellectual who would rather bury yourself in statistics than look into the eyes of a human being, then this book is not for you.

If you're comfortable knowing that people around the world are suffering and you've done relatively little or nothing to leverage the margin in your life to improve someone else's life, then this book is not for you.

If you only invest in things that produce a measurable return and solely benefit you, then this book is not for you.

If you are satisfied with almost solving a problem, then stop wasting your time and put this book back on the shelf.

I'm tired of self-proclaimed, well-intentioned people settling for the life they've achieved and refusing to answer the urge that is present within each of us to connect with someone else as a human being. We were created to be loved and to do something meaningful in life. I grow weary listening to nonprofit leaders who pour donor dollars into meetings,

symposiums, and informational seminars but refuse to take action. I'm tired of hearing sermons on what we should, might, or ought to do. It's time for action. It's time to gather our resources and leverage our excess to make a measurable impact. The time is now!

Chapter 1

Eliminate Distractions by Practicing Absolute Clarity

"Clarity affords focus." —**Thomas Leonard**

Our success is a direct result of our commitment to keep our focus simple and clear. It can certainly be a challenge to maintain your focus as your momentum and capacity increases. As Soles4Souls grew, the pressure built from within and outside the organization to diversify and broaden our focus for, as some might argue, greater impact. Our resolve was never diverted in directions that distracted us from our purpose.

Every new employee received a laminated card that stated four simple, strategic organizational goals. One of those goals is "Every day is Day 1." The description read: *Do not forget where we started, what we have accomplished, and treat every day as Day 1.*

The day I saw that single shoe wash up on the beach and felt an urge to do something to help the people most affected by such a tragic natural disaster, I had one clear goal in mind: collect and give away shoes. That simple goal, which evolved into an international relief organization that distributed more than twelve million shoes to people in need, pushed us to achieve our goal of giving away one pair of shoes every second.

No one in the office ever had to question what we were trying to accomplish, why we existed, and what should take priority. Our world headquarters also included a distribution center. This was important to me. Many times people would stop by and drop off both small and large amounts of shoes. It didn't matter what we are doing at the moment or the size of the donation being made—that individual and his or her donation took top priority.

Everyone Else's Expectations

Whatever you do in life, whatever you decide to achieve, or whatever you set as your goal, there will always be someone else who will have different