

eight

the final step

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.

—MAHATMA GANDHI

I would like to share with you a letter I recently received from a young man named Tyler Eltringham, the founder of OneShot, a wonderful organization that helps people receive meningitis vaccinations, both in America and in Africa.

Dear Blake,

A few months prior to starting my freshman year in college at Arizona State University, I discovered

TOMS Shoes. A close friend of mine had shown me her pair of TOMS and then explained the concept of One for One. The shoes could have been the most hideous pieces of apparel on the planet and I still would have purchased multiple pairs, knowing how it was helping an individual elsewhere. But I really liked them!

My first pair were black canvas, and for the first two months I owned them I must have worn them every single day, because my friends told me it seemed like the shoes had become my second skin. The next semester, I purchased another pair as a “Congratulations, you made it through another semester of school!” present to myself; this became somewhat of a tradition, and now every semester I buy another pair.

A little background: I’m not the traditional college student. When I was five years old my parents got divorced; my mom and I packed our bags and moved from Pennsylvania to Arizona to start a brand-new life. Growing up, I always pushed myself into leadership roles, whether that meant barking out orders to stuffed animals on my playground as I led them into a fierce war, or soaking up the opportunities that Student Council had to offer.

Flash-forward to high school: My mom, who is also my best friend, fell very ill with pancreatitis and grand mal epilepsy. My stepdad had to quit his job to take care of her full-time, and our financial situation darkened. For three years we battled poverty

and on-and-off homelessness, but the entire time my mom never gave up hope for my future. For instance, she once went without her pain medication for weeks to save up enough money to ensure I had a good Christmas. That image of selflessness still buckles my knees.

When her condition worsened, I dropped out of high school and got my GED, hoping to advance my life faster so I could be a provider for them, as they were for me. Seeing her passed from doctor to doctor with no one wanting to take ownership of her disease infuriated me. It became the catalyst for my next move.

Through a few acts of serendipity, I enrolled at Arizona State University as a Barack Obama Scholar. There, wanting a truly interdisciplinary education, I entered the Bachelor of Science program in Geographical Sciences and embedded myself into my community, meeting many incredible people and becoming involved in some wonderful organizations (the President of the Geography Honor Society, a Pat Tillman Scholar, and ASU's community of entrepreneurship and innovation).

One day, after reading about the ASU Innovation Challenge, a college competition for people hoping to get seed funding for big ideas, I sat there thinking for a few moments before switching positions and crossing my legs. I looked down at my shoes, which happened to be TOMS, and started thinking "One for One . . . so much could be accomplished with

that sort of movement. Is it possible to incorporate my passion for health and medicine with the One for One movement?"

I can't say exactly what happened next, but I had an idea, based on a disease I'd heard about when I was preparing to move into my residence hall my freshman year: meningococcal meningitis.

A little background: Meningococcal meningitis is a bacterial infection that claims the lives of nearly 2,600 people in the U.S. every year—although it is most common in Africa, where more than 75,000 suspected cases were reported in fourteen neighboring countries that make up Africa's "meningitis belt," the earth's largest confluence of meningitis.

The infection causes inflammation of the membrane surrounding a human's brain and spinal cord, leading to symptoms such as fever, stiff neck, and headache. Without immediate medical treatment, death can arrive in as few as two days, and even with early medical attention, up to 20 percent of patients will still die. Among the survivors of the infection's initial onslaught, more than 20 percent will experience permanent and life-changing ailments such as deafness, blindness, learning disabilities, or nervous system damage.

Meningococcal disease occurs all over the world, even in the U.S., 7,400 miles from the meningitis belt. Being a communicable disease and very easily transmitted in close quarters such as dormitories and other university housing options, meningococ-

cal meningitis is not only one of *our* country's most silent and deadly predators, it is common on college campuses.

It is also *completely preventable* with vaccination.

The idea was simple: College students need vaccinations, and the populations within the meningitis belt of Africa needed vaccinations. If I could somehow convince my peers to get vaccinated, while vaccinating the meningitis belt in the process . . . it might just work!

This is OneShot: a nonprofit organization that provides meningococcal meningitis vaccinations to college students living in dormitories and university housing, while also addressing the global issue at hand. For every single vaccine administered state-side, OneShot donates a vaccine to the meningitis belt of Africa.

While studying marketing, I learned that consumers don't buy products. They buy solutions. So my idea was to create a *local* solution to a *global* challenge, applying TOMS' One for One initiative toward preventative medicine and epidemiology.

I had never self-identified as an entrepreneur; I was just determined to make a difference while moving my career forward. Heck, I was a pre-med student at the time! Starting OneShot was hardly a walk in the park. While we had amazing ideas and plenty of passion to drive us forward, it wasn't easy to gain the trust of people who mattered, people who needed to believe in a group of college kids who

wanted to save the world. Only one of our organization's officers had a traditional business background, so formulating our business plan and proposals were challenges, as were crafting a story that was easy to believe in while proving that our idea was sustainable and economically feasible.

We didn't let this stop us. When we competed in the ASU Innovation Challenge, we pitched our brains out to a group of judges from around the country: experts in entrepreneurship and venture start-ups. With the help of my mentors Dr. Michael Mokwa and Dr. Denise Link at ASU, the backing of two amazing individuals in Steve Thompson and Gail Hock, and the support of a team of dedicated peers (who just happen to be my best friends)—Corey Frahm, Ginger Whitesell, Geoff Prall, Tyler Liss, and Amy Weihmuller—OneShot took home the \$10,000 grand prize of the ASU Innovation Challenge!

Now we knew that if we were capable of convincing industry professionals that our idea was worth investing in, it was worth investing our own lives into it as well—and we did.

As OneShot became more recognized in the entrepreneurial sphere, opportunities came our way. Suddenly organizations approached us, wanting to help shape our business: We had the backing of our entire university, as well as our local vaccine and immunization partnerships and advocacy groups; and even groups like the U.S. Centers for Disease Con-

trol and Prevention were interested in our initiatives. Media and news outlets started contacting us for publicity, and soon we were on the cover of the *Phoenix Business Journal*, the *State Press*, and even on ABC News Radio and ABC College News!

As of today, OneShot is fighting the uphill battles of a traditional business start-up. My team of officers and I are all full-time students who also have jobs to pay the bills, but OneShot is a constant top priority. We are currently finalizing the logistics for our first big vaccine drive for our 2011 Fall Move-In, immunizing freshmen who are moving into their residence halls: We're expecting over 1,200 students! We're working with ASU, the College of Nursing and Health Innovation, and the Maricopa County Department of Public Health to ensure that the success of our event was worth all of the struggles we put forth to organize the initiative.

In a perfect world, OneShot will eventually be acquired by a larger company with more resources, and we can transform from a meningitis-shot company into a One for One vaccination company, covering a wide range of preventable diseases.

To be honest, it's all really frightening that, despite all our hard work, there's no way of knowing if it will work in the long run. I know everyone has these kinds of doubts. It's still scary. But no matter what happens, OneShot has taught our team so many lessons, the payout is unquantifiable. The experience has been truly life changing: I am no longer

pre-med. My passion is in helping others on a much larger scale. I have become incredibly attached to seeing OneShot become successful, and leaving a legacy in which we aid communities that would otherwise not have been given help.

Thank you, Blake, for inspiring me to do what I can to save the world.

People often ask me what I consider to be my goal at TOMS. The truth is that it's changed over the years. When we first began, the goal was to create a for-profit company that could help relieve the pain and suffering felt by children around the world who do not have shoes. And that objective continues to be a powerful driver for me and everyone else at TOMS.

But recently my attitude has shifted. Today I would say that my goal is to influence other people to go out into the world and have a positive impact, to inspire others to start something that matters, whether it's a for-profit business or a nonprofit organization. I feel a deep sense of responsibility to share everything we have learned at TOMS, so that as many others as possible can start something important. That's why letters like Tyler's move me so much. In fact, I get more joy from hearing those kinds of stories than from almost anything else.

Tyler is only one of many out there who are taking that wonderful and courageous step forward, who are moving from thinking about doing something to actually doing it. People are always telling me that there's something they want to do or that they have a goal they want to accomplish

but that they don't have the confidence to start or that their idea isn't a big one like TOMS.

I remind them that TOMS was just an idea in my journal when we started. As I wrote in Chapter 5, start with something simple. Don't worry about being large. Every big company you see today was once small.

None of the people mentioned in this book said they were so confident when they began that they knew they were starting a large business or a major nonprofit. They just felt compelled to start something. So they did.

Scott Harrison volunteered with Mercy Ships, and this experience led to his idea for charity: water. Lauren Bush became a spokesperson for the World Food Programme, and being a volunteer changed her life and the lives of kids all over the world as well because it moved her to create FEED.

You don't have to have a lot of money, a complicated business plan, or a great deal of experience to start something. Start small, and maybe you'll stay small, which is fine. Or maybe you'll get bigger. I never thought that TOMS would occupy my whole life. I started it as a side project while working on another company.

Remember the poem at the beginning of this book:

*To know even one life has breathed easier
because you have lived—
This is to have succeeded.*

You don't have to start something with a goal of saving the world. You don't have to create a Falling Whistles or in-

vent a FEED bag. If whatever you do helps just one person, you've done something wonderful. If I receive a letter from someone who started something small and who helped two kids who might not otherwise have been helped—that means the world to me.

The most important step of all is the first step. Start something! What if that idea you have in the back of your head is a really good one, one that might end up helping tens of thousands of people? You owe it to the world to act. Or maybe it will help only a few people: The same advice applies. If you don't do it, you are missing out on something big, and so are the people who could have been helped.

Someone once told me the key to staying healthy was tying his shoes. What he meant was, once he actually put his shoes on and tied them, then he would go out for a run. And by going for a run, he was able to stay very healthy.

That same philosophy applies here. The first step to starting the journey is simply to put on your shoes—that's all. Then tie your shoelaces. Just because that first step is a very simple one doesn't mean that it can't lead someday to something profound.

Not only is taking that first step less difficult than you may imagine, but it may change your life in wonderful ways. Once you start helping others, you will notice this change—you will feel less sad, less stressed, and more purposeful. This isn't wishful thinking on my part. I have seen this happen over and over.

If it isn't clear already, I firmly believe that every person alive can make this world a better place. I also believe that we are all equipped to help one another. Just as we all

have five senses, we all are born with the ability to improve another person's life. And that means everyone reading this book has the potential to make a difference. So in the next few moments, as you finish this book, I ask you to please put it down and think about whatever plans have been running through your mind. Let those ideas move from the back to the front of your mind. Take this time to write them down in your journal or call a friend or relative to discuss them. Get your idea out in the open. Decide that you can do this. Tell yourself you're not going to let this thought go unnoticed.

Then I want you to take the next step. Start something that matters.

For me, the ultimate success of this book will be measured not by how many copies it sells but by the number of people it inspires and the number of letters we receive. So please keep me posted by posting your story at www.startsomethingthatmatters.com.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Carpe diem,

Blake