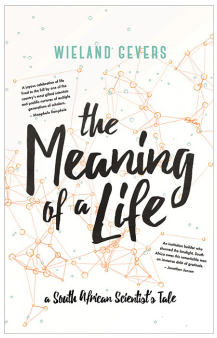
BOOK TITLE:
The Meaning of a Life: A South African Scientist's Tale



AUTHOR:
Wieland Gevers

ISBN:
9781928246688
(paperback, 312 pp)

PUBLISHER:
Best Red, Cape Town; ZAR320

PUBLISHED:
2025

REVIEWER:
Anwar S. Mall[1]

AFFILIATION:
[1]Emeritus Professor, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

EMAIL:
anwar.mall@uct.ac.za

HOW TO CITE:
Mall AS. A multi-talented scientist reflects on the meaning of his life. S Afr J Sci. 2025;121(9/10), Art. #21946. https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/21946

ARTICLE INCLUDES:
☐ Peer review
☐ Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:
29 September 2025

A multi-talented scientist reflects on the meaning of his life

Milan Kundera's protagonist Tomas[1] loved the way he lived his life, in absolute certainty that it was by his choice, in the spirit of Beethoven's '*Es muss sein*' … 'it must be so', which became the basis for the latter's fourth movement of the last quartet, *Opus 135*. What a shock Tomas had during a conversation with his partner that the love story of his life exemplified the opposite of 'it must be so', to 'it could just as well be otherwise'. The lesson for the reader was that every decision one takes, no matter how innocent, can potentially have any number of possible outcomes. That reminded me of my very first short and unplanned meeting with Professor Wieland Gevers – a brilliant, warm and humble being[2] – that changed the trajectory of my life. Thus began my career at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and my relationship with Wieland – a relationship that enriched my life, and certainly those of many others too.

What becomes obvious to readers of *The Meaning of a Life* is Wieland's love for the acquisition of knowledge and the sharing of it, his capacity for the deep reflection of the steps he took along the way to fulfil his goals, and, most of all, his unusual ability to integrate different aspects of academic and university administrative matters in a way that made learning exciting and meaningful. His brilliant teaching, which earned him the Distinguished Teachers Award, came from a deep understanding and love of his subject, and for medical research. Whilst his later legacy as an institution builder was aimed at improving the quality of the learning environment at the institution through curriculum and faculty reform, his honest appraisal of why these were not entirely successful is appreciated.

Wieland says in the Preface that he was constantly preoccupied with the arts and humanities while his professional life was devoted to the medical and natural sciences. Perhaps herein lies the origins of his love for integrated learning (much to the benefit of many) in the true spirit of 'consilience', shared so clearly in a book of the same title[3] by one of the world's leading biologists of the 20th century, Edward O. Wilson (the first line of which reads "I can remember very well the time I was captured by the dream of unified learning"). Wilson believed that a relationship between the sciences and humanities would be of benefit to human welfare. Whilst reading, I was reminded of the words of another great South African scientist, Phillip V. Tobias, whose advice to his students was that "whilst they specialised in their chosen field, they should be able to carry on a reasonably intelligent conversation in the other fields of human endeavour, including music, art, history, politics and ethics. That is the mark of an educated person."[4]

Such ideas were the basis of Wieland's approach to teaching and research, and later in his attempts as a Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town at curriculum reform and projects such as the Distinguished Professor lectures and his role in the establishment of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), amongst other projects. What was required in the case of the latter at the national level, was an amalgam of scientists of various backgrounds to work together ("…the inclusion of all scholarship that is empirical in nature..."), using evidence-based research and everyday scientific methodology to investigate the country's health issues. At a national level, Wieland served on the National Health Research Committee to survey and integrate the health research carried out by the different science councils. His aptitude for rigour benefitted the various committees on which he served, when (in many instances), he drew up clear guidelines for the functioning of those committees. His strong opposition to the National Qualifications Framework proposals, based on breaking down learning into unit standards, is another clear example of his love for integrated learning and its benefits.

Readers may well describe Wieland as an institution builder. He went well beyond his clinical training as a medical doctor, a medical biochemist and a teacher, to make enormous contributions to UCT and higher education in the country in general. This required his participation in a variety of educational matters and policies, even at governmental level, guiding major national institutions (some of which he contributed to the formation of), to fulfil their roles in their interactions with tertiary education.

As one reads, one is struck by the notion of how a young mind, if stimulated adequately early enough (South African government take note!), excels not only in a chosen profession, but also is easily able to adapt to new challenges and respond to these challenges with great introspection along the way, resulting in a reflection of 'a meaning of a life', shared in this story for the benefit of the interested reader. Wieland has gracefully written about his successes in his career as a scientist, researcher, teacher, administrator (at the level of tertiary education) and family man, bravely and honestly highlighting both his professional and personal failures and shortcomings and the controversies they generated, and the lessons he learnt from it all. This is a 'must-read' for all academics and administrators in tertiary institutions and would be of benefit to anyone interested in the educational future of our country. I think it was Albert Einstein who once remarked that a successful and satisfying career in any field creates in one an anchor to broader thinking, a worldview rich in meaning and a desire to share for the benefit of others. Wieland has successfully achieved this in his life – a life that has benefitted many.

It was inevitable that I felt a huge pang of regret and sympathy for those whose dreams and ambitions of a successful career and life such as his were stymied for so many by the discriminatory practices of the previous apartheid regime in South Africa. Wieland's approach in the training of young scientists went well beyond matters of race, in a true spirit of transformation of our tertiary institutions and I, amongst many, stand testimony to that.

Readers, especially those involved in matters of education, may have wanted or benefitted further from an analysis of our schooling system which produced the 'unprepared' student for higher education. The Academic

Development Programme at UCT, whilst claiming much success as a bridging programme between school and university, would have its burden eased if matters of poor schooling standards were attended to by the powers that be.

So, what does give a life meaning? Being comfortable in one's own being, curiosity and a love for learning, and a strong desire to create opportunities for others to share the benefits of one's talent, especially with the downtrodden; Wieland displays all these qualities in his rich life.

References

1. Kundera M. The unbearable lightness of being. London: Faber & Faber; 1999.
2. Mall AS. Mucus: Slippery, sticky, but sweet and satisfying. 29th D.J. du Plessis lecture, delivered at the Surgical Research Society Meeting, Cape Town, 3 July 2008. S Afr J Surg. 2007;45(2):54–59.
3. Wilson EO. Consilience. London: Abacus; 1999.
4. Green J. Tobias still tickling funny bone. The Star. 2004 August 06.