

Making A Difference:
Purpose-Inspired Leadership for Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility
(CSR)

By Wayne Visser (VDM, 2008)



~ PROLOGUE: MY STORY ~

This book is the result of the research I conducted on Meaning in the Life and Work of Corporate Sustainability Managers for my PhD in Corporate Social Responsibility, which I completed at the International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility of Nottingham University Business School in the UK in 2006. Hence, it is essentially an academic piece of writing.

Blake Ashforth, quoted in Bartunek (2003), lamented that “sometimes academics take very exciting, engaging, and important work and present it in such a way that it looks like a butterfly squashed between two pieces of glass” (203).

By contrast, I hope that I will succeed with this book not only in giving a research caterpillar its wings, but also presenting my research in such a way that you, the reader, will find it exciting, engaging and important. While the book is entirely readable from cover to cover and written in a very accessible, albeit academic style, you can also skip through sections that are of less personal or professional interest.

In this opening Prologue, I have chosen to present extracts from my personal journal to illustrate how my research emerged from a particular fascination with the subject of meaning in life and sustainability. Acknowledging critiques of autoethnography that warn of a “decay into narcissism” (Keith, 1992), in which the principal investigator becomes a major rather than a minor character (Saldana, 2003), I have kept my “confessional tale” (Van Maanen, 1988) fairly brief and mostly confined to this Prologue.

I present extracts from my diary in five categories.

Areas of Personal Disclosure

1. Entries that deal with influences on my conception of meaning;
2. Personal reflections on the importance of meaning in life;
3. Distillations of my purpose in life
4. Creative expressions that include reference to meaning (mainly poetry); and
5. Links between meaning and sustainability.

The latter will also include some relevant biographical information as background to me as a researcher. In the Introduction, I offer some thoughts on what these personal disclosures may mean for my research.

Influences

My diary is mostly a repository of my own thoughts and writings. However, occasionally I am inspired by someone else’s words and I record them in my journal as well. There are several such entries dealing with the subject of meaning, which give some insight into who has influenced my thinking on the subject. These are presented in Table 1.1.

It was Bob Steyn, former minister of the Cape Town Unitarians, who first introduced me to Victor Frankl’s writings, which probably had the most profound effect on my interest in meaning. I acknowledge this in a 2003 letter to his widow, Marie:

My research is going well. Since my last letter, I changed my topic to focus on applying the work of Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy / ‘will to meaning’ theory to business. Perhaps I have Bob to thank, since he first introduced me to Frankl’s book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. The basic idea for my research is simple: People are all searching for meaning in their lives, and one way they find this is by feeling that they are making a contribution, beyond themselves, to society. Hence, corporate social responsibility has the potential to enhance personal meaning. Do you know, I found an article written by Pick ‘n Pay’s Raymond Ackerman on the importance of Frankl’s ideas. So, I plan to track down ‘uncle Raymond’ and speak to him as well. (29 June 2003, 32 years old)

Table 1.1: Quotes on Meaning Recorded in My Diary

Author / Reference	Quotation, Diary Entry Date and Age
Carl Jung, quoted in <i>The Myth of Meaning</i> by Anneline Jaffe (1984)	Life is crazy and meaningful at once. And when we don’t laugh over the one and speculate about the other, life is exceedingly drab. (12 January 1989, 18 years old) Life is - or has - meaning and meaninglessness. I cherish the anxious hope that meaning will preponderate and win the battle. (12 January 1989, 18 years old)

Anneline Jaffe (1984) in <i>The Myth of Meaning</i>	There is no objectively valid answer to the question of meaning; for, besides objective thinking, subjective valuation also plays its part. Each and every formulation is a myth that man creates in order to answer the unanswerable. (12 January 1989, 18 years old)
Unknown author in a birthday card	We come into this world alone, and we will leave alone. In between, we must find whatever meaning we can in our lives. (13 January 1992, 21 years old)
Gerald Heard (1937) in <i>The Third Morality</i>	Life does not need comfort when it can be offered meaning, nor pleasure when it can be shown purpose. Reveal what is the purpose and how he may attain it and man will go forward again hardily, happily, knowing that he has found what he must have – intentional living. (11 June 1993, 22 years old)
Israel Regardie (2002) in <i>The Golden Dawn</i>	The meaning of your life is found in growth, development, and self-transformation. (31 July 1995, 24 years old)
Warren Goldstein, quoted in <i>South Africa: Reasons to Believe</i> by Lundy and Visser (2003)	Our lives are full of significance here. It may not always be 'pleasantville' but it's always meaningful. (27 August 2005, 34 years old)

Two other books which have had a direct influence on my thinking are: *Prisoners of Our Thoughts* by Alex Pattekos (2004) – “applying Viktor Frankl’s principles on meaning in life to our work” (1 December 2005, 34 years old); and *What Should I Do With My Life?* by Po Bronson (2002) – “a really fascinating and honest account of how different people have searched for meaning in their work.” (2 December 2005, 34 years old). Bronson’s book stimulated me to reflect in my diary about how meaningful my own career is:

What is my passion? What is my unique contribution to the world? I am standing at a crossroads. Either I can continue to specialise (in CSR, sustainable business, etc.), in which case an academic route makes sense. Or I can re-engage with my broader interest in how business can make a positive difference in the world. (2 December 2005, 34 years old)

Reflections

One of my earliest reflections on meaning was as a youthful, spirited reaction against my father’s disillusionment with life:

Dad said something that I don’t think I’ll ever forget. He said: ‘I’ll guarantee you something, and that is that the older you get, the more disillusioned you become with life.’ Now I am determined that will never become the case with me. I am developing a faith in life and the things it presents me with. I will untiringly search for understanding and experiences which will give me a growing sense of meaning in life. I will not leave this life unfulfilled! (19 January 1989, 18 years old)

Around the same time, I had lost faith in the certainties associated with religious beliefs. As a result, I began to see the discovery of meaning as an individual and often bewildering quest, as this letter extract to a friend, Michael, illustrates:

My views on things have, I believe, matured somewhat – certainly they have changed. I no longer view the Church, or Christians for that matter, as representing the ‘one and only way’. I mean, hell, aren’t we all in our own way trying to find some kind of meaning in this crazy life?! I am no longer in a position to judge the path any person chooses, for each must find their own way. So let’s set the record straight: I, like yourself and everybody else, is struggling along, doing my best, trying to make sense of this puzzle called life. (23 January 1989, 18 years old)

This idea I adopted that we search for, or even create, our own meaning in life is repeated several times in my diary. I even went so far at one stage as to engage in

a self-created course in self-transformation” with a friend, Dale, in which we would “meet weekly to structure and practise a series of practical exercises aimed at accessing deeper levels within ourselves, learning to increase our personal effectiveness, consciously creating meaningful experiences and challenging our existing views of the world and how it works. (26 July 1998, 27 years old)

Meaning as Self-Discovered and Self-Created

- “My eternal search for meaning and my efforts to expand my awareness remain at the forefront of my being” (23 January 1989, 18 years old);
- “I had always had a sense of being absolutely free, even obliged, to create my own meaning in this life” (19 November 1991, 20 years old);
- “Love is understanding – understanding people and events in context; understanding that we are all, each in our own way, searching for meaning and truth” (20 November 1991, 20 years old);
- “I need to re-discover my well of meaning and refresh my spirit of destiny” (2 May 2001, 30 years old);
- “Underlying all this is a sense of purpose or meaning that I am striving for, a desire to make a difference” (9 October 2003, 32 years old); and
- “I was so angry. All I wanted was to be a ‘free spirit’. Why couldn’t they understand that? Why was I not free to create my own meaning?” (29 March 2005, 34 years old)

At some point, I also concluded that meaning is a more appropriate goal than happiness, as I explained in this letter to my friend, Kimberly:

I no longer believe that happiness or the absence of pain is what we should be striving for in life. To me, meaningfulness and learning are far better measures of a life worth living. And in terms of these, I have always been richly blessed. (24 October 2004, 33 years old)

As it happened, the challenge of finding meaning in my own life became far more than a theoretical exercise during the course of doing my PhD. I faced one of my biggest personal existential crises when, in July 2005, I separated from my wife, and in February 2006, got divorced.

Purpose

The first time I really wrestled with my life purpose was when I had to decide what to study at university and hence what to pursue as a career path. At the time (I was 16 years old), Christianity was a big influence in my life and I considered doing a degree in religious studies and perhaps becoming a minister. But I also had a strong interest in business, partly because I wanted to transcend the psychological and material limitations which I associated with my parents' lack of money, and also because I had dabbled with starting my own small businesses as a teenager (e.g. selling home made chocolates and jewellery) and I enjoyed the entrepreneurial element.

As a way reconcile this dichotomy, I began to wonder if business could be a means through which to realise my religious aspirations. In my diary, I note how I interpreted a biblical verse (2 Samuel 15 verse 25: Take the ark of God back into the city ... there is no representative of the king ... Go back to the city in peace) to mean:

Go back to business where I first called you to - for indeed, there my truth is needed. There I need representatives - among thinking men - as a sheep among the wolves. For you must experience in order to grow - be in the world but not of the world. You have work to do in the world before you seek to escape it." (10 August 1987, 16 years old)¹

By the time I was 18 years old, I had distilled a dual purpose.

My Purpose in Life

- My Life's Goal - To learn to love fully and truly; and
- My Life's Quest - To aid business in realising its spirituality.

(23 January 1989, 18 years old)

My "quest" included the following elaboration:

Ultimately, I'm wanting to see business change its perception of its role and function in society. The idea is still in its inception, but it's along the following lines: Business / organisations should exist to serve rather than to exploit society; to be an instrument for the expression of meaning and growth by individuals and groups of people. Profit may be necessary for the survival and development of an organisation, but it is only a means to a greater end, namely the enhancement of quality of life.

A few years later, I restated my view on the role of business in meaning-making in the following way:

¹ I should add that I no longer think this way.

Business's true quest is a noble one - to serve the needs and aspirations of humanity and become the playground for creativity and the search for meaning." (3 March 1993, 22 years old)

More recently (6 September 2004, 33 years old), after reading *Inspirational Leadership* by Lance Secretan (1999), I penned a threefold purpose.

My Revised Purpose in Life

- My Destiny - To cultivate and celebrate the worthiness of life;
- My Cause - To catalyse meaning discovery in people and organisations (I believe in the transformative power of meaning discovery); and
- My Calling - To sow seeds of inspiration through my writing and speaking.

These distillations of the purpose of my life may give the impression that I view meaning in a fairly goal-oriented way, i.e. as something that can be clearly defined and consciously pursued. In fact, my perception is somewhat different. I do experience meaning as a fairly pervasive driving force in my life, but it is usually a rather vague sense – an intuition or feeling – of what I ought to be doing to make a unique contribution in the world. And as the two extracts above suggest, it can and does change over time.

I also appreciate that meaning is not only to be discovered, as Frankl (1964) put it, through “doing”, but also through “being”. For example, the following diary extract refers to “moments of meaning” after attending an address by former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, at a Parliament of the World’s Religions event held in Cape Town:

Such moments of inspiration and meaning as I have experienced tonight awaken me to the wonder of life and the privilege of living during these extraordinary times in this remarkable land. (5 December 1999, 28 years old)

Creativity

My musings on meaning in life over the years have found creative expression through my writing, including my published books, unpublished stories and poetry². For example, on the eve of the new millennium, my family and I performed the following private ritual:

Towards sunset, we ceremonially dedicated a Millennium Tree, chosen to symbolise the ‘tree of life’ and planted as a gift to future generations. The Yellowwood species selected has been known to exceed 1,000 years in age; hence, perhaps this tree will see in the next millennium as well. The dedication entailed a shared reading of a poem which I wrote, as we stood around the placed tree (1 January 2000, 29 years old).

The poem in question is called *Tree of Life*, and includes the following opening stanza:

² For the curious reader, full versions of my poems and other writing are online at www.waynevisser.com

Original seed,
In the womb of Mother Earth,
Germinated by a desire for meaning,
Nurtured by the water of evolution.

Later that year (15 March 2000, 29 years old), feeling that I was slipping into a routine-driven rut in my life and work, I wrote a poem called *Vukani!* which means "Wake Up!" Here in the opening stanza, I equate meaning with passion for life:

There was a time when I was passionate –
seizing the day
discovering new worlds
searching for meaning
challenging my beliefs
making a difference.

Another poem, called *Rainbow Beads*, was written for a friend, Pat's, 50th birthday, in which I compare her life to an artwork imbued with meaning in stanza 4 (18 June 2000, 29 years old):

This masterpiece of joy and strife,
This quilt without mistake,
Is ever-changing, never-ending –
A meaning-filled mosaic.

Stanza 17 of *Musings on Morphic Time* (14 January 2001, 30 years old), a philosophical poem, suggests that life is all about shaping meaning in our allotted lifetime:

Time is clay in our hands
For us to mould and manipulate, to shape and sculpt
Into symbols of meaning.

The Day the World Changed (28 October 2001, 30 years old) is a poem I wrote about the 9/11 tragedy. The reference to meaning in the fifth stanza is reminiscent of Frankl's (1964) claim that meaning can be found even in the midst of suffering:

The world has changed forever!
Forcing us to venture beyond the fortress
of our comfortable self-indulgence
Prompting us to dig deeper than the shallow well
of our cultural arrogance
Pleading with us to rise up above the morass
of our religious intolerance
Helping, in our quest for meaning, to realise
that the enemy is within.

The Artist's Gift (9 April 2004, 33 years old) is a poem I wrote after a moving conversation I had with an artist selling his work on the pavements of Cape Town. In Stanza 9, I hint at the bohemian notion that artists, though they may be materially poor (as was the case in this instance), are rich in life satisfaction:

It was clear to me
That he lived only to give life
To pregnant meanings
Forever gestating in his being.

In Stanza 2 of *Zen Garden* (29 April 2004, 33 years old), I animate meaning, suggesting that it is something which courses through our lives:

Water trickles	Meaning flows
Frogs hop	Ideas leap
Flowers bloom	Joy smiles
Leaves rustle	Insight whispers

In Chapter 3 of a work-in-progress short story called *Dreams of Gold* (4 November 2001, 30 years old), I relate meaning in the life of the protagonist to the idea of fighting a just cause – an idea which Yalom (1980) raises and I explore further in subsequent chapters:

From now on, he would be a fighter, a proud warrior in the tradition of his ancestors. The enemy was clear. He was signing up for a modern war - against colonialism, against apartheid, against capitalism. His life had meaning once more.

In my second published book (Visser, 2003), I contemplate the role of meaning in a South African context:

Frankl's ideas may help to explain the existential crisis being experienced by many people caught up in the rat-race of Western culture. Ironically, once you no longer have to worry about material comforts, you begin to wonder whether your life is really worthwhile – are you making a difference in the world? Well, there is certainly no shortage of challenges in South Africa, and the vision of South Africa as an example for the world to learn from is a compelling dream to hold onto. Could it be that it is easier to live a meaning-filled life in South Africa than anywhere else in the world? (115)

I have also seen writing as one of my own paths to meaning. In an author self-interview, following the publication of my book *South Africa: Reasons to Believe*, I made the following observations:

My vision is to inspire people to make a positive difference - in their own lives and in the world. That is the strong theme in my recent book - we have the power to make things better, and it all starts with a constructive attitude. I hope that, through my writing, I contribute to people's sense of personal mission and meaning in their lives." (23 May 2003, 32 years old)

Sustainability

My interest in corporate sustainability emerged at university, where I was doing a business degree. I have already mentioned the broader context of my spiritual interests in business. Hence, I was particularly interested when the issue of social responsibility was briefly dealt with in one of my courses. But it was really my involvement in AIESEC (The International Association of Students in Economics and Commerce) that significantly raised my awareness of sustainability issues. During that time, I attended AIESEC conferences on

sustainability in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Japan. I also chose Green Marketing as the dissertation topic for my Honours degree (Visser, 1991) and began writing on sustainability, with my first published article dealing with the Rio Earth Summit (Visser, 1992).

As previous sections have intimated, I first conceived of my business-related mission in terms of spirituality. Over time, however, I began to align more directly with the social and environmental agenda, as a way to express this. For example, when I was 23 years old, I gave myself a pep-talk in which I expressed the desire to “step off the train of convention and security, bound by the tracks of social acceptance, and roam free in the hills of self discovery and meaningful social contribution.” (31 August 1994)

In 1995, I left my position as a Strategy Analyst for the international management consultancy Gemini Consulting (part of the CAP Gemini Group) and completed an MSc in Human Ecology at Edinburgh University, including a dissertation on A Human and Ecological Critique of the UK Financial System (Visser, 1996). The motivation statement accompanying my application to do the degree is illustrative of my thinking at the time:

What attracted me about the course [is] its holistic, cross-discipline, integrative approach to sustainable development, illustrated by its inclusion of the ‘softer’ dimensions (e.g. philosophy, psychology, spirituality) which have been so lacking in my formal education to date and yet have engaged me personally for some time. (11 July 1995, 24 years old)

Relating the studies to my career aspirations, I also made the following observations:

I have attempted to apply these insights [on sustainability] at a practical level through my work as a management consultant, and in a wider sense through my involvement in local think-tank organisations such as the World Business Academy and the Third Way Society. I have also tried to promote systemic and ecological thinking at large by researching, writing and publishing articles on topics which apply these perspectives to business and economics. Now I feel the need to consolidate my learning in order to direct my consulting career more explicitly towards this area. Not only do I expect to derive immense personal satisfaction from this new focus, but I also believe that it will help to introduce a much needed fresh and holistic perspective into South Africa’s traditional business and economics sectors. In addition, I feel it will serve as a good basis for a longer term career in socio-economic futures research, publishing, writing and teaching. (11 July 1995, 24 years old).

Following completion of the MSc, I returned to South Africa, where I co-founded the South African New Economics Foundation, an NGO established to promote a just and sustainable economy, before joining international accounting firm KPMG to set up their environmental consulting services. In the following six years with KPMG (1997-2002), I became Director of Sustainability Services, managing a team that audited and advised multinational companies on their social, ethical, health, safety and environmental policies and practices.

During this time, I continued to relate sustainability issues to the creation of meaning at a personal level, as the following diary entry suggests:

We each need to find our own sense of meaning and inspiration from nature - whether it be by growing things, by walking in the mountains and forests, by actively campaigning for environmental issues, by consciously buying environmentally-friendly products, or by allowing ourselves to relate more intimately with the creatures which share our planet. (12 September 1999, 28 years old)

My beliefs about the sustainability-business-meaning link were made more explicit in my first book (Visser & Sunter, 2002), where I ventured the following opinion:

The great thing about creating a sustainable future is that it is an inspiring ideal: something that, like the elephant, is bigger than ourselves - a little frightening, somehow magical, an exciting challenge at the very least. And in today's barren desert of materialism and secularism, people are crying out for something inspirational, even sacred, to quench their thirst for meaning. Sustainability is that oasis shimmering on the horizon. It is what we call the 'wow calling', the hunger for something to believe in, the eternal yearning to make a positive difference.

(85)

I left KPMG in 2003 to begin my PhD in Corporate Social Responsibility at the International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility at Nottingham University Business School, the fruits of which you are now reading. During that time, I had another book published (Visser, 2005a), in which I begin to speculate about the relationship between meaning and corporate social responsibility:

One of the ways companies can address an apparent lack of purpose and meaning in the workplace, which may in turn be associated with lower levels of employee motivation, job satisfaction and worker loyalty, is to actively engage in corporate social responsibility activities. By the same token, employees that make an effort to be involved in social responsibility initiatives in their workplace, be it through volunteering on community projects or in other ways, are likely to experience an enhanced sense of meaning in their lives (136).

I go on to note that this line of thinking "remains to be adequately empirically tested" (135), and although my research sets out to answer slightly different questions, I nevertheless hope that it will begin to make a contribution to this exciting field of enquiry.