

**Welcoming Challenges**  
**Rev. Lynda Sutherland**  
**September 24, 2017**

Thanks to the choir for singing the Holly Near song “I Am Willing.” They sang, “Let the winds of change caress me – even though it burns my eyes...” because, “I am open and willing to accept whatever challenges come my way.” That, my friends, is usually more of an affirmation than a statement of fact, isn’t it? I WILL accept this challenge, I WILL accept this challenge...I WILL accept ALL these challenges at once...?...

Not all challenges are unwelcome. When I Googled “challenge” this week, I was given pages of links like, “challenges to take alone,” “challenges for when you and your friends get bored at a party,” “fun challenges with food,” and “touring the North Pole.” There’s the 30 day health challenge. You can get a full package of challenges to give you complete control over your life and make you into a Zen master – it’s only \$149! Such a deal!

A challenge can be exhilarating. I remember when I finally submitted my application to seminary. I was going to be the first of my siblings to get a master’s degree, and I was embarking on a professional career path – something I had thought was only a dream. I was taking up the challenge and actually doing it!

Before I took that challenge on, I did some real soul searching. Did I have the energy to keep working at that challenge over time? That becomes a bigger concern when you get into your fifties! Did I want it badly enough to stick it out when it got tough? I knew it was going to get tough – that’s why it was a challenge!

So by the time things became really challenging, I really was pretty open and willing to face all the surprises, the really tough stuff, my weaknesses and growing edges, the weeks away from home in Chicago – in January! – I didn’t enjoy all of it, but I had already wholeheartedly embraced whatever challenges that earning my degree would bring.

When we choose our own challenge, it can be rewarding and exhilarating.

Unfortunately, not all challenges are the ones we can choose. Not all challenges are welcome.

Some challenges knock us over before we know what is happening. An accident; a diagnosis; a sudden death; loss of a job; losing a home to fire or flood; a betrayal; a loss of faith. Suddenly our lives change, and we have no choice but to deal with this new reality.

Some challenges make their presence known in increasingly insistent ways, until we finally have to take them up: the relationship that is growing increasingly difficult; a physical symptom that we can no longer ignore; a slow crumbling of the foundation of our house; the stress in a job that is beginning to take a toll on us at home. One day we decide it is time to look reality in the face and deal with it, because the alternative is even worse. We choose, reluctantly – maybe kicking and screaming all the way – to take up the challenge, but it is most definitely not welcome.

So, Lynda, why are you asking us to WELCOME challenges? For two main reasons:

- 1) Challenges are unavoidable. Life is challenging. Staying the same is challenging; change is challenging. Any choice we make brings challenges of one kind or another. On top of that, life throws challenges at us at the most unexpected and always inconvenient times, small challenges, huge challenges, earth-shaking challenges. Even if we try to bar the door, lock the windows up tight, and stay in bed, challenges will break in.
- 2) Which brings me to reason number two. If we try to avoid our challenges, we have to deal with smashed windows and a broken door, after being dragged out of bed half asleep. I have found – and this is the voice of hard experience speaking – that I have an easier time of it if I get up, comb my hair, and greet a challenge at the door. When I look a challenge in the face, I can start to deal with it right away.

Perhaps you have noticed this, too.

The thing is, it's hard to do, even when I really, truly know that welcoming challenges is the best, the easiest, the least painful way to deal with them. So it's good for me to remind myself frequently.

It's interesting to me that I find I am often better at welcoming big challenges – the ones that really can't be avoided – than I am at the smaller ones. I think that's because meeting new challenges means I have to change how I do things, even sometimes how I think about things. I don't always find myself willing to change my mind or my habits unless I really have to. Yet when I do, I often find that it turns out to be a really positive thing.

We are finding this to be true here at First Parish Northboro, in the challenge we have taken on this year to run our Religious Education program without a Director of Religious Education. In figuring out how to do this, we have had to challenge our ideas of what really needs to be done in order to have a vibrant program that really serves our kids and families, and what things we could maybe do differently. And what might not need to be done at all. Wow. What a concept.

When we really took a look at this challenge, we started to think outside the box. We had to decide what our goals are, and to be creative about how we are going to try to reach those goals. We have shared out the work, being careful not to overburden any one person. We have had to make adjustments.

We have to be willing to try and fail, to see what works, and what doesn't, to adapt and try again. We have to actually welcome failure as a learning experience. We are learning to withhold judgment, to give and take and work as a team, and to create a more interactive environment for teachers as well as for kids.

We are finding it both exhilarating and anxiety producing. But when we first began this deeply collaborative process last January, we were amazed at the result, and at how much our young ones really loved their classes. So it's a challenge we are welcoming and building upon for this year. We will see what happens. We plan to report back to the congregation regularly through reports in the Perspective weekly email.

All around us, there are people who are throwing wide the doors of welcome to challenges they had never thought they would encounter. You can see examples in the lives of loved ones, right

here in this congregation, as they meet personal challenges. You can see people welcoming local and national political challenges as we struggle with what it means to best serve our citizens and the needs of immigrants and refugees.

You see it in rescue and recovery efforts after the devastation of three massive hurricanes in a row. You see evidence of rising up to meet and greet those challenges in the women's march many of you participated in, and the marches still happening, and new efforts at voter registration, and record town hall turnouts, and grassroots efforts to find solutions to complex issues.

Most of these are challenges that we certainly wish we didn't have to deal with. But having embraced the new reality, people are meeting those challenges with courage, energy, creativity, and solidarity.

Courage. Energy. Creativity. Solidarity. That's what it takes to meet this challenge we call life. Those winds of change are *going to* "caress us, even though it burns our eyes;" so instead of wasting our energy fighting them, let's embrace the challenges those winds bring with them. Come in, challenge. Be a guest at my table; perhaps you are a guide from beyond. Perhaps this is what I am really made for: to face challenges and find positive, loving ways to meet those challenges.

As Sonia Ghandi said, Together, we can face any challenge as deep as the ocean and as high as the sky.

Let us welcome our challenges, together.