Even the most optimistic person would have to admit that life can be sometimes be hard. There are

moments, sometimes years, when we feel as if we are struggling against a fierce wind. When this

happens we think that it is unfair. Why can’t life be easy? For other people it often appears

effortless. Yet you can meet these challenges.

Why, we wonder, are we afflicted by illness, grief, a career going nowhere or a relationship that is

not working? These thoughts themselves become a pattern. They lead us towards depression and

an overwhelming feeling of self-pity.

The fact is life’s challenges come at us all the time. Sometimes they are small, so small that we

hardly notice them; a door that is stuck, a careless slip with a sharp knife. They can be as simple as

a fall from a bicycle, an injury from a sports game, or an assignment that is way too hard.

They might be more serious; a disease manifesting itself in our bodies, the death of a loved one,

sudden redundancy, a divorce. The fact is there is no such thing as an easy life. Life is full of

challenges. This is neither good nor bad in itself, it is simply the way it is. What, we ask ourselves,

is the point of so many struggles? Surely this must make life, for many people, an entirely

depressing affair?

Yet if we look a little deeper we can see that without challenges, our lives would be empty and

meaningless. Without challenges, we would miss the point of life entirely. This is not, as some

would tell you, to have as much fun as possible. It is to fulfil our potential which, incidentally, is far

more rewarding.

It is to grow inside and realise the really important things. These are not going to be an

accumulation of wealth, houses or businesses. These will have nothing to do with fashions, fast

cars, trophies or medals. It will come, very simply, from the difference you have made to this world

and to the lives of others in it. This is not to say that these things cannot be fun, enjoyable and even

rewarding. The rewards, however, often come from unexpected places. It is life’s challenges that lay

them at our feet.

An unusual and unexpected realisation often comes, when we face our challenges. It is a discovery

of true value. Redundancy becomes an opportunity, a freeing up of direction. Death and grief, as

sad as they are, can be a way of appreciating life and lead to a desire to make more of the gifts you

have been given. Illness, in spite of the obvious discomforts and trauma, often leads people to reevaluate

exactly how they have been living their lives. We see again and again in people who

overcome serious handicaps and obstacles, heroic and inspiring behaviour. Life’s challenges can

actually help us.

Take, for example, your childhood. Isn’t it true that parents try and protect their children from

challenges? Worried about the child falling or getting hurt, they interfere. Yet the child cannot

learn without the challenge of walking and falling over, riding a bicycle and falling off. How we deal

with challenges allows us to learn vital lessons. We need to experience defeat. Learning to lose in a

game, teaches all manner of lessons. Learn the lesson well and perhaps you will not need such a big

wake up call later in life.

Not one of us can tell the future. We do not know what is around the corner. We know that we must

engage with life if we want to reap its many rewards. The fact is, from the moment we are born

until the day we die, our life will be filled with problems to be overcome. Facing them is how we

learn. It is how we come to know ourselves. It is how we are formed. The obstacles sculpt us. Our

resistance to them builds our strength and begins to define who we are.

In a way, we come into the world blind to the bigger reality. In the darkness, how else can we know

who we are inside unless we face resistance and feel the path ahead? It may be that we walk away

from the challenges, give up, cave in and hide. We drop out of school too early. We give up on a

task because it is difficult. At the first sign of a problem we walk away. We avoid responsibility.

Yet deep inside we know that we have turned away from the challenge. Might we only be putting off

the inevitable? In a sense, every challenge we come up against has something to teach us. You

apply for a job you really want. You are short-listed, your enthusiasm is infectious. You feel

passionately that you can do this job. Your enthusiasm, however, will only get you so far. You lose

out on the job to someone who is better qualified.

You feel angry, let down, upset and hurt. Yet, what is this challenge offering to teach you? It is

telling you, in the clearest possible terms, that in order to achieve this goal you will have to

undertake a further qualification. Qualifications are there for the taking. You can accept the

challenge or walk away feeling sorry for yourself. Which one will get you the job you want and that

you know that you can do?

Defeat and failure are excellent teaching experiences. They are straight to the point. They are

terrifyingly accurate and don’t they feel personal? Of course they do, they are talking to you. You

should be listening.

Yet disappointments don’t physically hurt you. They simply point you in the right direction. Of

course you may choose not to learn the lesson. The next time it happens, the wake up call, often

seen in terms of health, may be much bigger. Stress, anxiety and frustration accumulate in a body.

Aided by a bad diet or addictions they lead directly to disease. You need to change your lifestyle,

your attitude and your approach to life.

It may be that you are on the wrong track entirely. A life that is a constant struggle, may be hinting

at some lesson simply not learned earlier. Have you ever had the frustrating feeling sometimes

described as ‘banging your head against a brick wall?’ It’s often when we finally realise that we are

taking the wrong approach to a situation that a revelation occurs. When we finally learn, we move

on and welcome the next challenge.

They are life’s lessons and they occur from the cradle to the grave. They come in careers, health,

relationships, marriage, children, personal faith, retirement. There are issues in your life from

which you will not be able to hide. There are tests to be taken and tragedies to be resolved. Each

one will be asking something of you. You can meet them, answer the question and move on.

The more challenges you face, the easier it gets. It only feels worse if you refuse the confrontation

and close your ears to the lesson. To live life successfully we must learn to deal with failures and

successes. We must meet the challenges. How we deal with them is the important thing.

It is learning about ourselves and what is really important in life. It is only when something or

someone is taken away from us that we really, for the first time, feel how lucky we are. Perhaps one

day that too will be your final gift to someone else.

In the end we are here for each other and perhaps the sooner we realise that, the happier, the freer

and the wiser we will be. Only then will challenges be really appreciated for the valuable wake up

calls and life lessons that they really are.