

WhatSustainsMe.com

Erica Goodstone

**The Paradox
of the Challenge**

**A Challenge Is an Opportunity
To Expand My Reality, Overcome Fear
And Reorganize My Life**

Foreword from the Editor

The following is a chapter from an upcoming book, *What Sustains Me*. It is a collaborative book. Each chapter is written by a different author, stands on its own, and is released independently. When all chapters are ready, the book will be published as a regular book as well as an e-book.

The central question in this project is: *What sustains you?*

More specifically: *What gives you a sense of peace, meaning and purpose in everyday life? What keeps you going when times are tough? What gives you the strength to face moments of crisis or despair?*

The book's topic could be described as an 'existential quest' or a 'spiritual quest'. We are consciously avoiding these phrases because they can be misleading. For instance, 'spiritual quest' often conveys the sense of a search for outside resources, beyond the realm of the physical world. Such a definition would exclude experiences that involve inner resources.

Our focus is on describing what we experience, as opposed to the philosophical or religious terms under which these experiences are usually framed. We are not describing a specific path, a 'right way' to do

things, or a 'correct' narrative of how it all works out. To the contrary, we are coming at it from different approaches and belief systems, including agnostic and atheist perspectives.

A key characteristic of this project is that each author is writing in a personal and experiential manner. The key word here is 'experience'. We hope that, by talking in terms of experiences rather than beliefs, we can find a bridge whereby people who come from different traditions or beliefs can be nourished by each other's experiences.

You can follow the progress of this project, and our other projects, at <http://LifeSherpa.com>

Serge Prengel

The Paradox of the Challenge

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I would never have written my novel if it hadn't been for the NANOWRIMO challenge.

It all started when my blogging friend, Willena Flewelling, told me that she and her family were participating in the National November Writers' Month challenge. Out of curiosity, I joined and started receiving some infrequent email updates. Then came the official invite to participate. The year was 2012. The month was October. At this point, the idea of attempting to write a novel had been in the back of my mind for almost a year. But I was still not sure I was ready to do this.

About 2 weeks before the start of the challenge, I received an unexpected phone call from Patrick Mascola, the publisher of the local Florida newspaper, *Around Town*, for which I had written a relationship and sexuality column about 17 years earlier. I had met him while I was on a year-long sabbatical from my full time job as a professor of health and physical education at F.I.T./SUNY in New York. I had not spoken to him since I had left Florida at the end of that sabbatical year. To my delight, he explained that he wanted to re-publish one of my previous columns, he praised my writing style, and then he shocked me when he shared that he had recently published a novel. To me that was a serendipitous sign that maybe I would participate in NANOWRIMO.

Inspiration, Example and an “Aha” Moment

Immediately after that phone call, I ordered his book *Hell on East Rock*. When the book arrived, I quickly opened it, and after reading only the first chapter I said to myself: “Oh, this is how you write a novel.” But I still was not definitely going to join the challenge. Then a few days before the end of October I was invited to attend a local NANOWRIMO kick-off party. So I thought, “What the heck. I’ll attend the party and maybe I’ll participate and maybe I won’t”. That party was delightful, inspiring, encouraging, and so much fun. I won a raffle prize of all sorts of goodies (candy, notepads, pens, and an inspiring poster) and I even received a few gold stars for showing up at the party and signing the form. In a state of lighthearted levity, I signed an agreement that I would commit to writing every day for 30 days. And I did, sometimes in the morning, sometimes mid-afternoon and a few times into the wee hours of the night. It did not happen on a rigid schedule. What worked for me was writing consistently, a certain number of words each day.

The goal was to start writing and complete 50,000 words or more of a novel during the allotted time period – the month of November. By the end of November I had actually written over 100,000 words and by early January my novel was published at Amazon.com. What I had not realized was that writing the novel was only the beginning. Once I had

the words down on paper, getting it published became a whole new challenge. I chose to self-publish it at Createspace.com. That led to hours and hours of struggle, confusion and frustration. Trying to figure out all the details by myself, I did not realize I could have received assistance from a live person on the phone to help me format and upload the files. There's something about digging in my heels and learning how to do something new that gives me satisfaction at the end but puts me into a state of frenetic frustration in the process.

Originally, my intention was to write a semi-autobiographical story of my life as a professor and sex therapist, but that got abandoned in the first few days of writing. A story emerged in my mind of a beautiful young lady born on a special Greek island. The characters and scenarios began to pop out of my mind onto the paper and I found myself outlining and creating headings for future chapters. In no time I was aware of the ending and found a natural way to bring together all the disjointed actions and events of the various characters' lives. It evolved into a star-crossed romantic love story that turns out right in the end and helps all those involved to emotionally heal. My novel, *Love in the Blizzard of Life*, was dedicated to the victims of Hurricane Sandy, an intense storm that had recently at that time devastated the northeast of the U.S.

What sustained me during this novel writing challenge was knowing that thousands of people around the world were also writing at the same time.

Each day I would write the number of words completed and observe my progress on their online charts. And each day my husband would ask how “Dr. Erica Tolstoy” was doing. Every time he said that, I laughed and I felt this warm sense of creativity flowing through me.

Challenges Inspire Me and Get My Creative Juices Flowing

NANOWRIMO was not the first challenge for me. A few years earlier I had completed a challenge to write 100 articles in 100 days for EzineArticles.com. At first I had a pile of journal articles to sort through and a list of topics I wanted to write about. But about halfway through the article writing, it became more difficult. It became harder to find new topics and to get started writing the next article. But again, it was a challenge and I was determined to complete it. That event rewarded me with a beautiful coffee mug, a mousepad, a coffee heating device, and a Diamond Author classification. Another challenge I later joined was to write 30 blogs in 30 days. I used my novel as the basis and chose healing words about love to influence the perspective of each blog post.

Challenges are not just about writing. Anything I want to accomplish seems to happen more easily as part of a challenge. In the past few years, wanting to get into better physical condition, I joined a small

Facebook group, Goal Guru, with the expressed goal of walking or jogging 365 miles in a year. The first year I thought I had reached the goal but then discovered that my miles on the bike were really kilometers. So the following year, I upped the ante and did complete my 365 miles. I continue to participate in that challenge every year. It keeps me going when I feel like stopping. Just when I feel too sore and tired, one of the members will post their miles and I am once more inspired to keep moving. And my body thanks me for it.

Another challenge that I absolutely loved was the 100 Day Challenge, a set of daily inspirational videos created by motivational coach Gary Ryan Blair. Every day, in his high energy, highly positive voice, he challenges us to be “excellent”, to think, talk, behave, believe and strive to be excellent in everything we say and do. One hundred days was quite a long time, difficult to persist, but well worth it.

That 100 Day Challenge inspired me to create my own challenge, based upon my lifelong learning about love, relationships, healing and spiritual connection. My *30 Day Love Challenge* was born as an evergreen course, a course that could be presented again and again to different groups of men and women wanting to learn how to create more sustainable and satisfying love in their lives.

*Challenges Can Appear As Difficulties,
Roadblocks, and Unwanted Setbacks*

In the process of thinking and talking about how a challenge actually sustains me, I began to realize that challenges are not always presented as an invitation from someone else. Challenges are not always about expanding my abilities and stretching beyond my comfort zone to accomplish or achieve something new and adventurous. In fact, challenges often present themselves as difficulties, roadblocks, or unwanted setbacks. *Challenges can be frustrating, painful, upsetting, dis-heartening and can easily become an invitation to just give up.*

I have certainly had my share of giving up, at least for a while, because the challenge felt too great. My first book was completed around 1992. With an agent and a slew of publishers' rejections, I finally just gave up and stashed the manuscript in a file box. Sixteen years later, in 2008, I had the good fortune to take a course with Glenn Dietzel about how to write your book in 12 hours or less. Of course, my book had taken about 2 ½ years to complete, but Glenn's course was a revelation for me. We had weekly mentoring groups. Several of these groups focused on promotion through social media, but one was all about writing and publishing e books. My goal and intention had been to write a new book until my mentor, Paul Jackson, causally asked me: "Why don't you take out the book

you already wrote and get it published?” “Duh! Why hadn’t I thought of that?” So I retrieved the manuscript, created a complete book, and then divided the book into smaller parts for e-books. *Love Me, Touch Me, Heal Me* was finally published online in 2009.

When Adversity Strikes, I Won’t Give In or Give Up

Challenges present themselves at unexpected moments. I have a goal, a deadline and a certain amount of work I plan to accomplish. And then the whammy comes and I must stop what I am doing, rise to the occasion if possible and find a way around the problem, or just give up.

It happened while creating the 30 videos for my *30 Day Love Challenge*. Unable to use my desktop because the fan was too noisy for recording, I set up and recorded the videos with my laptop. After the first few videos, I had created an organized system. I would open up the power point slide show, start the Camtasia recording, give my intro for the day’s lesson and continue to speak as I followed the power point slides. This worked well for about 15 of the videos and then my laptop had a mind of its own. Sometimes it would start out just fine until ... somewhere in the middle of the recording I would hear a strange sound and a message that the program was attempting and unable to upload a driver. So, I would have to stop the

recording, delete it and start all over from the beginning. Sometimes the computer would just crash and I had to restart it before setting up the slide show and recording again.

There was an Adobe Flash problem in my lap top that was not going away, but I had several pre-paid customers that were expecting their videos. One of my mentors had taught us to “sell the product and then create it”. Not my favorite way to do things. I had, in fact, already created all the power points including most of the images, but I had not yet completed the videos. So each day I struggled, often having to re-do each video 3 or 4 times until the computer would cooperate and let me complete the job and upload it to YouTube. This process of creating the videos took charge of my life for several weeks. And as I got closer to completion, it became a challenge between my laptop and me – and I was not going to let the computer win!

I Try Not to Let My Vision Be Obscured by the Obvious

A challenge is not always an invitation presented by someone else or the need to overcome an unexpected roadblock or problem. Sometimes a challenge arises because I have a goal and don't immediately know how to achieve it. What works best for me is to have a clear vision of what I want, to be

honest with myself as I evaluate my current situation, and then to take small steps toward my goal. Holding on to my vision helps me to overcome obstacles by helping me get out of my own way and allow my creative imagination to take the lead. How do I know this is true?

The Toddler's Secret

I learned this secret from a toddler in a video. At first he was just standing in his crib. Then he began to slip his legs between the wooden slats until his feet were on the carpet. I watched in amazement as he started dragging the crib toward the nearby bed. Then, when the crib was close enough he climbed over the top of the crib onto the bed and immediately started jumping up and down. His mom picked him up, put him back in the crib, and I watched him do it all again. That baby had a goal, an intention, a vision and he did not allow his current circumstances, being stuck in an almost enclosed crib, to cramp his style and prevent him from reaching and enjoying his goal. He was not stopped by a difficult situation. In fact, he enjoyed the challenge and used his creative imagination to find a way.

The day after watching that baby's inspirational ingenuity, the green chroma roll arrived in the mail and I got ready to create my green screen video background. My plan was to perhaps tape the paper to

a wall but that would have possibly caused some paint to chip. So I decided instead to drape the paper over my standing poster, a tall poster which I often used to represent my work when I would speak or have a booth at a local event. However, the poster was too high for the ceiling and I had a real hard time maneuvering it out of my office into another room. Then I had to find a way to clip the paper so that it would stay in place. It all seemed almost impossible but in my mind I held the vision of that little baby taking his tiny steps, dragging the crib, and exuding absolute joy when he reached the bed and was able to jump. That baby inspired me to figure out how to create my green screen. And I did. In fact, I shot a video of my process and shared it in a blog post for my blogging and affiliate marketing friends.

Seeing Is Believing It Is Possible

Seeing that little baby drag a big crib, undeterred by the size or weight of it, was inspiration for my soul. If he could do it, hold on to his vision in spite of the apparent difficulties, then I could certainly find a way to accomplish my goal. Having a vision is the key to success. When someone else presents a challenge and they provide the goal, my vision is clear. However, when adversity strikes and I am suddenly blocked from carrying out my plans, my vision may get temporarily obscured.

Once I see the problem or difficulty as a challenge, instead of a roadblock, the solution seems to more easily present itself. It is the ability to see above and beyond my current adversity that helps me to get to the other side. In each situation, a shift in consciousness, a change in my perspective, is required. When I was living in Westport, CT, I used to attend poetry readings and sometimes read my own poems. At one of those readings, a man shared his poignant poem about seeing fields of green grass and colorful flowers. He then shared that he had written that colorful poem while living in a bleak and drab concentration camp in Poland. While living in the bleakest of circumstances, he imagined himself lifted out of the dreariness into a land of greenery and color. Eventually his vision became his reality.

The Paradox of the Challenge

When a challenge is presented, it can easily stir up all sorts of fears, insecurities and concerns:

- “Can I do it?”
- “What if I fail?”
- “Will I look foolish?”
- “I don’t have enough time.”
- “I have all these other tasks that need to be done.”

The paradox of a challenge, for me, is that the challenge itself can sustain me as it becomes a catalyst for completing tasks that I resentfully avoid facing. Give me a solid challenge and I will get those bills paid, papers filed, taxes done, and even do the laundry and clean my home. In my normal, everyday experience, these would be chores and I would most certainly procrastinate before getting them done. But for me a challenge creates meaning, purpose, often urgency and a sense of importance. Then those usually annoying chores become opportunities to clear my head, clear my living space and allow creative ideas to incubate in my mind.

Without a challenge, I may want to write a book. I get started, maybe even completing a few chapters. But somewhere along the way I get distracted, lose my focus, and put the project aside for a future time – sometimes never returning to complete it. When I have a real challenge, either an invitation to participate or an agreement to get a job done by a certain time, I cannot avoid facing it. The deadline and the commitment create a sense of importance and urgency. And with that clear goal, pre-determined deadline and definite objective, I cannot avoid facing the challenge head on. That not only sustains me but it propels me toward accomplishment of my goals.

Do I or Don't I? – That is the Question

Don't get me wrong. I do not jump into new challenges every day and I certainly do not seriously complete every challenge I take on. Each challenge begins with two questions:

- "Should I or should I not?"
- "Do I have the time or energy, passion or desire to do this thing now?"

There are two options available – do it or don't do it. When faced with a challenge, my response is not automatic. I always have a choice about whether to do it or not. There seems to be a sense of self-definition right from the start, beginning with a conscious choice for me to say "Yes, I will do it." Once I make that firm decision that I will do it, then everything else in my life around me seems to take a back seat. Chores like doing the taxes suddenly take on a new meaning. They are now seen as simple tasks that need to be completed to clear my space and my mind for this bigger, more important and more pressing matter – the challenge.

A Challenge Creates a Reorganization of My Self

Making that clear decision to take on a challenge is a redefining moment. In spite of my fears, doubts or worries that maybe this is not good for me, once I make that choice I have already crossed the line. Maybe no longer exists. I am focused on my goal, I feel

the time pressure and my energy rises to assist me. The process of accepting a challenge and becoming determined to do what it takes actually requires a whole reorganization and reorientation of myself.

One example is the challenge I entered a few years ago in the Goal Guru Facebook Group. The challenge was to walk 365 miles in a year. The goal is clear and definite. How we get there is of our own choosing. That first year I thought I had completed the goal only to discover that the stationery bike miles were really kilometers. The second year, I doubled my efforts and barely made it through the end of December but I did make it. The third year, I started out strong immediately on January 1st so that I wouldn't have an end of the year crunch to meet my goal. The bigger purpose for this challenge, of course, is to continue to maintain and improve my health each year.

When we take on a challenge, we don't always realize at first just how much will be required of us. Sometimes we start a challenge with good intentions and drop out quickly because it seems more difficult than anticipated. I have a friend who loves to write and even teaches writing who started the NANOWRIMO challenge a year ago and stopped about halfway through. It took her an entire year to regroup, emotionally prepare, and then decide to do it. The second time around she completed the 50,000 words before the end of November and received her congratulations certificate.

My 30 Day Love Challenge taught me a lot. I discovered that when someone is not ready to do what it takes to complete a challenge, they often feel they must criticize and complain. That is a sign they have not made the full commitment to do what it takes. It is so easy to criticize the format of a challenge rather than to look inside yourself to discover what is stopping you from doing what it takes to complete the challenge. And often what it takes is a firm decision and a reorganization of your thinking, your behavior and your practices.

That Inspirational Moment and a Touch of Support

No man or woman is an island. We live in society. We interact with and rely upon other people. None of us can do it all alone, no matter how invincible we may believe we are. I have discovered two important components of my process when I am facing a challenge – finding that inspirational moment and receiving the kind of support that sustains me.

Often, after deciding to take on a challenge, I will temporarily appear to be procrastinating. I can't seem to get started. I find myself doing all those chores I had been avoiding for weeks, maybe months, maybe even years. But I now understand that those tasks are helpful distractions while my inner creativity is percolating and assimilating. I can't predict how long

that internal festering will take before my creativity bursts forth in what appears to be an inspirational moment. That is the moment when I begin the outward process of my challenge.

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can hurt me to the core. Especially during those early internal incubating days, the words I hear can make or break my confidence, my resolve, my intention and my focus. Once I have actually begun moving toward my goal, even negative words can more easily be shrugged off because I know I am already doing it.

Support can be so comforting and can arrive in many different forms. While I was writing the chapters of my novel every day, when my husband would call me “Dr. Erica Tolstoy,” to me those were the sweetest words I had ever heard. Equating my newbie novel writing to that of a celebrated and renowned author was his way of encouraging me, reminding me that I am okay and that I am in good company with authors who have come before me.

Coping with a temperamental laptop, feeling intermittently pressured and overwhelmed as I tried to complete my 30 Love Challenge videos, the support I received from my Google Hangout friend, Mary Gallagher, made all the difference. When I would share my latest struggle and difficulty, she would always help me to see the benefits of what I was creating and to imagine the videos already completed.

When the world gets to be too much, I do sustain myself by taking on a challenge. If there is no current challenge looming in my horizon, then I grit my teeth and delve into that task or chore that I have been avoiding. There are always several of those waiting to be handled. And a funny thing starts to happen. As I clear away the clutter and get those things done, my mind becomes open and ready to take on a new challenge. Every challenge I face begins with a commitment that must be made before my actual capabilities are revealed or before my accomplishments have built up my confidence.

Taking on a challenge, for me, is taking a leap of faith into the unknown. I have come to realize that my initial feelings of anxiety, fear, overwhelm, even depression, take on a new meaning once I am committed to the challenge and have a clear vision of my goal. Maybe it's something deeply embedded in my personality that I seem to thrive on flirting with the danger and uncertainty of a challenge. As I propel myself out of my comfort zone into the unknown, I manage to redefine myself and grow more confident in the process. All of us get frustrated, blocked and even stopped by circumstances and life events, but for me many of life's challenges become a catalyst to reorganize and redefine myself. Challenge is not only about what I accomplish but each challenge leads to a continual expansion of the boundaries of who I am.

About the author



Dr. Erica Goodstone helps men and women heal their relationships through love. As a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Marriage Counselor, Sex Therapist, Body Oriented Psychotherapist and Personal Life and Health/Wellness Coach, Dr. Erica's life's work is about revealing the simple secret to healing and creating love that endures. Her popular book, *Love Me, Touch Me, Heal Me* and her novel, *Love in the Blizzard of Life*, as well as her Kindle and Smashwords books, all delve

deeply into the heart of love – what interferes, suppresses or helps love to grow and thrive. Hint – it all begins with self-love. Dr. Erica’s virtual courses guide you to heal your life and get ready for love. Check out her Healing Through Love Seminars, her Love Me Touch Me, *Heal Me Relationship System*, and *the new 30 Day Love Challenge*. You will never look at love the same way again.

You can follow the progress of this project at:

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