

SO YOU THINK YOU OUGHT TO WORK IN HOLLYWOOD?

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Ever since you were a little kid, you've dreamed of moving to Hollywood and being an actor / writer / director / fill-in-the-blank. You've dreamed of fame and fortune (we all have, it's okay...). You've practiced your Oscar speech, and vowed to use your future wealth and influence to alleviate the plight of mankind.

Or, maybe not. Maybe you didn't grow up dreaming of the bright lights at all. Maybe this is a very recent dream, one that's taken you by surprise. Never in a million years did you think you'd be considering a career in show biz.

Either way, you've got the calling! Or, at least, you're pretty sure you do. You have the desire, isn't that enough?

However, desire alone is not a sufficient indication of a calling to the entertainment field. This is a mission field / professional arena in which you also have to be naturally talented. It isn't fair, in that annoying economy of God which is always just but not always fair. You have to have been born with a creative gift to work as a screenwriter, actor, director, editor, producer.

God often plants a deep desire in our hearts for the very thing that He needs us to do. Missionaries and pastors offer a great example – most will tell you that they desperately desired their mission fields long before they had the opportunity to pursue them. They LOVE what they do!

Flannery O' Connor was once asked how someone should know if they are supposed to

be a writer. She answered that the only reason to be a writer is "because you're good at it." To a large extent, Hollywood is like that.

So how do you know for sure? How can you determine if God has really "called" you to Hollywood?

Act One: Writing For Hollywood has developed a list of questions for you to brood over, to help you make a decision. Do yourself a favor: be honest. This is a tough business. It is not for everyone. And a good deal too many people come here with big dreams, only to find discouragement and bitterness. Our hope is to help you better determine if this "calling" is truly from God.

SEVENTEEN THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE PURSUING A CAREER IN HOLLYWOOD

1. MOTIVATIONS - Why do you really want to be in the entertainment industry? What will success look like for you?

The first reason to pursue a career in Hollywood as a writer is NOT:

- a) Because you think that film and television are huge potential media of truth; NOR
- b) Because you are tired of the liberal / Democratic / secular / godless agenda that is the ideology of choice for many in the business; NOR
- c) Because you love the feeling that you get when the lights go down in the theater and you

think that making movies must feel as easy and fun as watching movies; AND CERTAINLY NOT

d) Because you want the money and power and fame that is associated with the industry.

The only reason that makes any sense to pursue a career in Hollywood as an actor or writer or director or producer or whatever is because YOU ARE GOOD AT IT. It is what YOU were made to do.

2. TALENT – What do you bring to the table (besides desire for success)?

Contrary to what productions like *Jack Ass* and *Anna Nicole* seem to indicate, real talent is appreciated and respected in Hollywood. It is the oil that keeps the cogs and wheels turning. Yes, there are those with seemingly negligible talent who have gone on to great success. But don't be naive – they DO have talent, it just lies in areas that aren't so readily apparent (i.e., manipulation, flattery, PR, sensationalism, and the use of other rather sketchy “gifts” that we're not going to get into here...), or maybe they were just born into the industry.

You will need genuine talent to survive and thrive, as a professional. But even more, you will need it to thrive as a Christian, because, by definition, you answer to a Higher Authority and don't have the option of “making it” by means of those other “gifts.”

Are you truly talented? Here are some questions we give to wannabe screenwriters to help them discern whether they should set their sights on a writing career. There are exceptions to every rule, and all of these may not fit some

famous writer out there. But as we say at Act One, “Do not strive to be the exception to the rule when it comes to craft.” So, then, how do you know if you might be called to be a professional writer?

a) You have always done it.

You have always written long letters, successful skits. You've kept journals. You are the one everyone in the office asks to write memos, or brochures. You are the editor of the school yearbook, the church bulletin, the college newspaper. There isn't a time in your life when you can't remember writing.

b) People tell you they like what you do.

This is really important. It isn't just about whether writing is therapy for you (private revelation...) but your writing has also consistently “worked” with other people. Do others affirm your talent? Do others like your writing? Do people say things to you like, “You are so funny – you should write a TV show!” or “I love getting a letter from you.” or “You should write a book.” If others are not encouraging you in this area, or if they don't even know you dabble in it, you are probably NOT called to Hollywood.

c) You are a word person.

You play Scrabble and Boggle and do crossword puzzles. (Emily Dickinson used to read the dictionary like others do cheap paperbacks.) You have consistently scored well on verbal tests in school.

d) You are a reader.

Even if you don't want to be a writer, a person in pretty much any aspect of the entertainment industry will be always reading, besides going to movies and watching television. You need to be a reader – of the Great Books, of the best

sellers, of the industry trades, of other people's screenplays. You need to shape yourself into a thinker who comes up with clever twists and wonderful plot points. You have to be a historian. A psychologist. A theologian. A poet. A salesman. If you don't like to read, guess what: You are NOT called to Hollywood.

e) You have something to say.

That is, you have something developed to say. Not just opinions, but arguments. You are one of those people who hears something absurd on talk radio and then formulates a speech about why it is wrong. You come up with better allegories than the preacher who is trying to relate the Scriptures to the suffering congregation.

Professional screenwriters need stories to tell. Lots of stories to tell. If you have only one project, you will not have a career. You need to be constantly brooding on the parables of Jesus and transforming them, and everything else He said into new applications for today.

Okay, so once you decide that you do indeed have talent, you can at least CONSIDER a career in Hollywood. But Talent alone won't cut it. You must also have:

3. R-E-S-P-E-C-T – What are you dumb at?

Beginners in Hollywood need humility. You cannot learn unless you respect the teacher. And anybody taking up the craft of the very complex screen art form has much to learn. Unfortunately, the opposite is true in many Christians who come to the business because, as a Church, we have made an art form out of disdaining Hollywood.

Be in awe of the things that Hollywood takes for granted. About storytelling and suspense.

About creating characters and making them talk. About crafting visual images. About collaborating in such a way that everybody's best gifts serve the whole. These are lessons about storytelling that the industry mastered 80 years ago and which make our cinema the envy of the world.

4. PASSION – Is there anything else you could really do with your life?

You have to love the movie business. Really love it. If it is just the money or influence you love, you will end up poor, forgotten and embittered.

We need Christian filmmakers who love the art form so much that they go to everything that comes out – because they really love it. They watch movies as filmmakers, not as fans. They look at serious projects as benchmarks in the development of the art form. Fans tend to talk about celebrities. Filmmakers tend to talk about directors, or writers or a genius bit of editing, or a remarkable moment of performance.

Secondly, you have to be passionate about your own talent and career. You have to believe in yourself. Believe in your project.

Passion is essential so that you will have the energy to make the sacrifices that will have to be made if you are going to make a go of it in this very competitive and difficult arena. You need to be so in love with this business that you will continue to find a way to be part of it even if you NEVER make a dime from it, even if you spend your life in poverty and obscurity. The odds are very good that you WILL spend your life in poverty and obscurity, so you'd better love what you're

doing. If you don't, then you risk a life of bitterness, anger and regret.

5. PATIENCE – How long will it take you to get discouraged?

Creatives in the entertainment industry must learn the art of what script doctor **Linda Seger** calls “hovering.” Much patience is required to learn the craft. To do the research. To wait for the call back. To make the deals. To wait for the collaborators. To do the rewrites. To wait until the script is really ready. To wait. To wait. To wait. If you do not have the patience to develop your craft or to increase your skill, you are NOT called to this business. People who tell us that they are coming out to Hollywood to try it out for a couple of years should just stay home. You must have a profound long-term commitment.

6. OPPORTUNITY – Is your life “empty” enough for an entertainment career?

Having a career will require a bit of a starvation period. There will be several years in which you will be making very little money while you work your way up. You have to be able to live cheaply and take low-paying entry-level jobs that won't have health insurance and spousal benefits.

You have to have a lot of time to “waste” on things that don't seem to have a specific payoff in sight. You need to go to a lot of screenings and parties and film festivals and mixers and classes and conferences. It's a hard thing for people to do who are also trying to be the Caregiver / Provider of Note for a family of

three or four or five.

One indicator of God's will for your life is certainly in the opportunities that open for you without much effort on your part. This is NOT to say that you don't work hard. You have to. It's an absolute must if you want to succeed in this business. But there is such a thing as finding just enough favor or weird coincidences to keep you moving ahead. Many people who are pursuing a career in Hollywood find that they are banging on doors, but the doors just aren't opening. If the doors aren't opening, even in small little ways, it probably means God is not directing you – you are.

7. PERSONAL PRAYER LIFE – What is God telling you?

Put your career in God's hands minute by minute. Offer Him your life over and over and over...until you actually start to let go of it. Every artist has to get comfortable with solitude and isolation – it is an essential element to creativity.

Be prepared for a negative answer. In fact, expect a negative answer. Assume a negative answer. Then, if opportunities and circumstances and natural forces still seem to be shoving you towards the Hollywood Hills – well, okay, you've probably got a legitimate calling to the City of Angels.

8. CREATIVE DISCERNMENT – Will baby steps be enough for you?

As a professional creative person, you will have to be involved in many projects that seem

to have little or no redemptive value. A lot of the product the industry churns out is just sausage to meet the hungers of the global media machine. You have to be able to see God's hand working in many unlikely places. You have to be able to understand that a baby step is not a compromise. Sometimes, you will have to back away from something that is irreconcilable with your identity as a Christian.

9. NORMALCY – Can you function in a secular environment?

Is your faith of a type which would makes it impossible for you to accept other people where they are? Are you “weird” in the sense that you can't speak without Christian-ese, or you can't get through ten minutes without making your faith an issue (kind of the way homosexuals often make their sexuality omnipresent...).

Christians coming into the industry at this particular moment need to understand that their first witness will be the excellence and beauty of the work they do, united to simple, virtuous lives of probity, rectitude, gentleness, self-donation, loyalty, and integrity.

Maybe you really like living in a Christian subculture surrounded by people who agree with you on the things that matter to you, and that is where you are supposed to thrive. That could be fine. Comfortable. But nobody who is that kind of comfortable is also going to change the world.

10. INDUSTRY ETIQUETTE – Do you have any self-discipline?

This is just respect again. Why is it that People of Faith most often treat people with less professionalism than pagans do? We have heard stories of many artists who have been exploited time and again by people in the name of God, than in the name of Mammon.

Don't whine. Don't rant. Don't expect special treatment. Be on time. Do your homework. Earn your paycheck. Be able to deliver what you commit yourself to. Know that your personal beliefs and symbols do not belong in a professional context, any more than if they were Marxist symbols.

11. ARTISTRY – What does mastery of the craft mean?

Believe that, as Dostoevsky said, “Man will be saved by beauty.” Know what he was talking about. And then spend time figuring out where the potential for beauty exists in the art form you have chosen. “Good enough” is NEVER good enough.

12. FELLOWSHIP – Where will you find authentic community?

If you do not find a cenacle, you will lose your soul – or at least your difference. The cenacle is not for living in, but rather a place to rest, to re-gather your sense of identity and vocation and message. This business has its own unique problems, and people outside the business rarely understand them (even pastors). It's crucial that you have mature Christians to

whom you can turn for advice and guidance. It's even more crucial that you have friends who are wise in the Spirit to hold you accountable. If you isolate yourself from regular Christian fellowship, it will be the beginning of a very nasty downward spiral. Trust us.

13. TRUST – Can you ever “let go”?

We cannot make any impact on the industry from the outside. We need to worm our way into the business, to renew it from within. There has never been a reform in the Church that started in the laity. In the true spirit of ecumenism, “The goal is not that we all become one, but that they all become us.” Too many Christians are out there on their own setting up piddly little production companies and making three million dollar movies that will never get into theaters. They do this because they are afraid to lose control of their projects, and they are afraid to get sullied by collaborating with nonbelievers.

You have to be able to step back from your project and let other people mess with it. You have to accept that no production will ever meet all your hopes for it. You have to put yourself and your project in the hands of people who may only have the project itself in common with you.

14. SPIRITUAL MATURITY - Do you have your spiritual act together?

Will you be able to avoid the pitfalls of hell hidden amidst the palm trees and swimming pools? Surviving in Hollywood is hard on

everyone. And surviving as a happy Christian in Hollywood is even harder. God holds us to a standard that no one in this city understands or acknowledges. You will come to learn what being “in the world but not of the world” truly means. Understand that this is a business motivated by fear (of failure, of aging, of poverty, of being fat). Ironically, there is little fear of success, which is often the greatest corruptor of souls. And if you crave stability or security, then you are SO in the wrong place!

You will have to give an account for yourself in a way that will be intelligible for people who don't get you, and who may think Christianity is what is wrong with the world. You need to know your faith well enough to explain it. You need to know when you are standing safe among ravenous lions, and when it is time to get out because they are starting to chew on you.

15. PRIORITIES - What in your life would you most mourn if you lost it?

If you are going to be of any use to God in Hollywood, He must make certain you are ready for the challenge. This is a painful process. He may have to go to extreme lengths to ensure that your priorities are in order. And the best way to teach these lessons and have their roots sink deep is through failure and disappointment. God can't trust you with success or power until He knows that you won't let Him down.

16. BIG PICTURE THINKING – What else will you have in your life besides the business?

Get involved in something that has nothing to do with entertainment, and nothing to do with you or your career. Volunteer at your Church, a soup kitchen, help the homeless, work with the Special Olympics, give blood, rescue abandoned dogs and cats. It will help you keep things in perspective, so you don't lose sight of the larger world. Another source of income will also give you a more stable sense of self (not to mention rent) while you are weathering the initial years of rejection. If you can't see beyond lights, camera, action, it's a pretty good bet you are not called to Hollywood: You're obsessed with it. A healthy Christian is involved in ministering to others and has interests in line with Christ. If you don't, you need to be before you come to Hollywood.

17. FAITH – Is there anything the world can throw at you that would make you doubt God's love for you?

As a Christian artist you have to have the ability to see everything you do as part of God's plan for you. You can't look at your life in terms of wasted years, wasted classes, wasted relationships, wasted efforts, wasted dreams. In the end, we really do not know what role it is that we are accomplishing for the Kingdom. If Hollywood is where you are supposed to be, then come and be here. Throw your heart into it, set your face into the wind, and don't look back. Don't be distracted by the success of others – never judge your own life by theirs. If God sends you to Hollywood, then He has a job for you to do, and it may not

be the job you anticipated. Don't argue.

Don't ever allow yourself to live the statement, "Okay, God, I can take it from here."