

# Hollywood and Hell

By  
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People often ask me, what has it been like working in Hollywood? Isn't it glamorous? Meetings with stars and powerful executives. What an exciting career. And Hollywood is exciting. Of course, going to Vietnam was exciting too. When I arrived in November of 1967 my lower intestinal tract simply stopped working. Just kind of shut down. Didn't start for two whole weeks. After two weeks, it started with a vengeance and I couldn't get it to stop for a year. Vietnam is where I learned the meaning of the word dysentery. Fascinating the varying effects of terror on the human body. Yes, Hollywood is exciting.

But how to communicate that excitement to a normal person? That calls for the right metaphor. Try this: A career in Hollywood is like spending your life in a junior high school in hell. (I realize that these days the educationally constipated call junior high school middle school, but whatever you call it it's the same thing.) Think of all the things you loved about that period of your life, the cliques, the raging insecurities, the shifting alliances, the empty-eyed wandering through halls, the popular kids, the geeks, the toilet/booger humor, the delinquents, etc, etc, ad nauseam. Now, just expand that out into infinity and add billions of dollars into the mix. Imagine a gigantic junior high school run by students consigned never to graduate, a junior high school that has devoured western civilization and controls the popular culture of the ENTIRE WORLD. Get the picture?

Considering the proximity of Hollywood to figurative hell it's always been a mystery to me why most people in the industry get so uncomfortable

when you try to talk about an actual literal Hell. I mean the Biblical version. They start getting really antsy. Personally I've always been intrigued and deeply disturbed by the Biblical Hell. As a concept, it's terrifying, but it just makes sense and I have an awful feeling that most people are going there. (I know I deserve to.) Especially the ones who think they're too nice for such a nasty conclusion to their lives.

Take the film "What Dreams May Come," starring Robin Williams and Cuba Gooding, Jr. This little aberration burped onto the screen, and staggered around a number of years ago before dying. Now this is a film that is just full of nice people who know they don't deserve hell. Not only are they nice they're creative too. What kind of heaven would the nice creative people of Hollywood like? Well there's one requirement, it must be a place where each person will be in absolute control of everything, the kind of control that eludes even the most powerful on earth. So when Hollywood is fantasizing in film about what heaven is like what will you see? Here it is, friends. And thanks to computer graphics it's a stunning place, exquisitely beautiful while being utterly empty and insipid in its self-absorption. No need for any larger deity here. Why waste god-hood on anyone but yourself?

I'm not going to tell you the entire depressing story of this film. Enough to say that it's about a whole family who dies...and it's BORING. However, there are a few cute little theological twists that deserve mention. For instance into this heaven you take all the psychological angst and neuroses that you had here on earth. To help you work through these minor deficiencies you're thrown into a celestial tub of finger paint and with all this grand goo you can make any reality you want.

To be fair hell *is* represented in the film and it's not a nice place. Of course like heaven you make your own. An interesting point: Once you're in this hell you don't get out. Which brings us to a sticky logical difficulty in the concept of the film. Needless to say everybody in this story believes in reincarnation. That means when you get to heaven you can choose to go

back into a physical body and live a new life on earth. Question: Nobody in hell ever gets out, yet people are constantly going there. Where are all these people coming from? Answer: It must be stupid idiots who were in heaven, chose to go back to earth, screwed up and went to hell. Talk about bad KARMA. I can hear some guy saying I earned my way back to heaven twenty times by being good. But the twenty-first time I was Bill Clinton. Is that fair?

In my creative life, I've wandered down many a strange road. I've collected quite a library of esoterica. One area of interest has been O.B.E.s and N.D.E.s. If you don't know what those letters mean I'm talking about Out of Body Experiences and Near Death Experiences. The mythology of O.B.E.s and N.D.E.s has a great deal to do with Hollywood theology. You know the N.D.E. drill. You die and float out of your body, then you feel bathed in love and you meet a "being" of light who tells you how wonderful you are even though you've been a selfish, unrepentant jerk since the day you were born. When you come back everything is changed. You leave your waiter job (and probably your wife), write a book about loving the whole world, go on the talk show circuit, make lots of money and become a channeler. (Just writing those words makes me approach my vomit threshold.) It goes without saying that when you're speaking to the crowds the last thing you mention is the possibility of a real hell where nice people might spend eternity.

I've read a lot of the books and heard many interviews with near death survivors. I think many of their stories are psychodrek. Out of hundreds of experiences, only a few have struck me as potentially real. One in particular stands out above all the rest and this one is *scary*.

I can't remember where I got a copy of "Oregon's Amazing Miracle." It's just a simple little booklet that somebody printed on a shoestring. That's the first thing that impressed me. Simplicity. The second thing was that the recorded event took place in 1924 long before all the hyped books of Raymond Moody and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, etc. It's the story of a man

named Thomas M. Welch. In nutshell, here's what happened:

In 1924 Welch was a young guy working at sawmill near Portland, Oregon. One day he walked out on a trestle to free some lumber and fell off. He was fifty-five feet above the water. At thirty feet he hit his head on a beam and then continued falling between the timbers until he went under water in a log pond ten feet deep. There he remained submerged for forty-five minutes. With his body hidden among the logs it took workers a long time to find him. Needless to say everybody presumed he was dead. And in Welch's words, he really was dead. What he saw during that forty-five minutes changed his whole life.

He awoke in another world. He found himself standing on a rocky shoreline. In front of him was a great ocean of fire that stretched away as far as he could see. There was nobody in this ocean, but there were many people standing on the shore. Some of them were friends and relatives of his who had died in the past. They recognized each other but nobody spoke. They couldn't speak. All they could do was stare at the ocean. Welch says that everybody seemed perplexed and in deep thought as though no one could believe what he was seeing. Welch knew that he was in the ultimate prison with no escape, no way out. You didn't even try to look for one. The only way out would be by the hand of God. Welch said to himself, "If I had known about this place I would have done anything to keep from coming here."

At that moment, Welch says that he saw a man walking through the crowd. His face was strong and compassionate. This man was unafraid, the master of all he saw. Welch believed that if he would only look at him he would know how to get him out of there. But the man walked on and didn't look his way. Then just before he was out of sight he turned and looked straight into his eyes. Instantly, Welch was back in his body. He knew that the man who looked at him was Jesus Christ.

So, what had been happening in the "real" world while Welch was in hell?

Workers had dragged his body out of the water and taken it to one of the offices to await the coroner. Everybody had given up on him except for a couple of crazy people who insisted on praying. While they were praying, he came back. Welch was taken to the hospital. All he needed was a bunch of stitches and he was fine. Thomas Welch was so concerned that people believe his story that he got affidavits from witnesses who were there that day. They swear that he was dead. The affidavits are included in the booklet.

So, here's this little brochure. Not professionally written. There isn't even any copyright data on it. (I searched and couldn't find anybody who owned it.) Obviously, it wasn't intended to be a big money-maker. It was just one guy believing with all his heart that he had been to a place he never wanted to see again and wanting to keep other people from going there.

In 1989 I used my own variation of Welch's experience as background material for a character I created for an "Equalizer" episode entitled "Sea of Fire." In the episode, there is a hit man named Borchek who tells the story of being shot and finding himself in hell. For the description of the nether world I referred to Welch.

I also used a variation of the experience in 1992 as partial background for the central character of a short-lived series I created for USA Network entitled (oddly enough) "Matrix." Unfortunately, the head of that network was so upset when she discovered that her executives had bought a series about a character who, had been to hell that she fired me as executive producer and tried to rejig the show in the middle of production stating that she didn't want such "negativity" on her network. As you can imagine the series became a monumental mess. I took my name off. USA made the thirteen episodes they had contracted for and then buried it in the middle of the night. One run and gone.

Which brings me back to my central question: Why is Hollywood so uncomfortable with the idea of a Biblical Hell? If it's just a nasty medieval

fantasy why should it bother anyone at all? Of course, if you happen to be a thoughtful person with an eye to the future the idea of a real hell should be of great concern to you. It was to Jesus. He talked more about hell than he did about Heaven. And every time he talked about it he gave a warning. If you doubt that try reading Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

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