



CHAPTER SIX

DEVELOPMENT HELL

*It is easy to go down into Hell;
night and day the gates of dark Death stand wide;
but to climb back again, to retrace one's steps
to the upper air—there's the rub, the task.*

—Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book VI

Sometimes, we listen to our notes. We heed the feedback from God. But just as with Hollywood screenplays, life can stall even when we are putting our best foot forward. We call this Development Hell.

In film, nobody wants to be stuck in Development Hell. You're in limbo, stuck in a snare of conflicting egos, notes that don't get addressed, and plots that have been rewritten so many times that they don't even resemble what caught the

studio's attention in the first place. There's little hope that your movie will ever get made. It's a depressing, frustrating hole in which to be trapped; you may have invested years of hard work, and for what?

Development Hell can come only after you've gone into Development and think you're on your way to the top, only to hit a patch of ice and start spinning out of control.

IN LATE 2003 I started working at MGM, and the first film I worked on was *Be Cool*, the sequel to *Get Shorty*. Following my policy of trying to add value and contribute wherever possible, I managed to make an impact despite being the lowest man on the corporate ladder. The plot of the movie hinged on a song that the young girl character sang. John Travolta's character, Chili Palmer, hears this song and it becomes a big hit in the third act of the movie. The filmmakers spent a long time looking for the song, but couldn't find anything that sounded quite right. Well, in working with Tracey Edmonds I had built a relationship with Alicia Keys's manager, so I called him. "Do you have any songs that Alicia hasn't recorded?" I asked. He sent me two, I sent them along to the *Be Cool* music supervisors and producers, and they liked one of them. It became "the song."

It was the perfect validation for me—there was already another junior executive working on the film, so to pull in a third executive was uncommon. I could have been the tenth exec on the movie, it wouldn't have mattered; I was just happy to be part of something and learn. And what a blessing that God had allowed me to develop relationships

at Edmonds Entertainment that helped me make an impact at MGM. I was able to leverage those relationships to contribute and to build my relationship with Elizabeth Cantillon, who had given me the opportunity to work on the film. I was happy and off to a very promising start.

But then the rumors began. About six months after I started, word got around that MGM was trying to sell the company. After a while, it looked like Time Warner (TW) was going to buy MGM. This was not good. TW had already bought a lot of the MGM film library, which included classics like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*. Rumor was that if TW bought MGM, they would consolidate the film library and shut the rest of the company down. I, along with thousands of others, would be on the street looking for work.

I asked God, “How is this going to work? As soon as I get here, the studio is selling?” I tried not to fret and to focus on the work, but that was easier said than done. The idea of having to potentially start all over again wasn’t only frightening, it was terrible. I couldn’t make plans, and I couldn’t take action. I felt directionless. No one at the office knew what was going to happen, and there was a lot of anxiety. “God,” I said, “how can you take me away from Tracey and lead me here, only to have me lose my job?” I didn’t understand any of it.

Eventually, the general consensus was that it wasn’t a question of if MGM was going to sell but to whom and when. I figured I was going to have to get a job in a market where there weren’t any. I knew I couldn’t sit back and wait around. Faith without works is dead, so I had to do my part in order for God to step in and do his part.

As it happened, in the summer of 2004 Will and JL, my old bosses at Overbrook, were holding a fund-raiser for Barack Obama's Illinois Senate campaign. I knew that Overbrook had a first-look deal with Sony, so it was likely that the chairman and presidents of production at Sony would be there. So I found a way to pay for the \$1,000 ticket.

The plan seemed to work. It was a wonderful event with lots of people and an elegant ambience. It's funny in hindsight; there was a moment when now-President Obama walked by and was greeting people, and I was far less interested in meeting the man who would become our first African-American president than I was in tracking down and meeting Amy Pascal, Matt Tolmach, and Doug Belgrad of Sony Pictures. After all, my whole reason for attending the event was to make contact with them.

I found them, walked right up, and introduced myself. There was no room for nerves or chickening out; if I wanted God to bless me I had to put works behind my faith! Long story short, they were great and were kind enough to indulge me in conversation. After a few minutes, I thanked them and walked away. That was my big Hail Mary pass. I was trying to set the stage for the job hunt I felt was coming and hoped that down the road they would somehow remember me.

September came, and with it an announcement that in an eleventh-hour move, Sony had swooped in with some equity investors to purchase MGM, despite all the signs that the sale was sure to go to Time Warner. I sighed. Okay, that was that. At least I had some concrete information. Now that a deal had been made, everyone involved had to wait on the Federal Trade Commission to approve the deal, which would probably take months.

At Thanksgiving that year, my family went on retreat. We were all sitting around in a circle having evening worship, and we went around with each of us saying what we were thankful for and what we were praying for. I told my family that I was praying and believing that God would give me a job at Sony. That night, we all wrote down our prayer requests. Mine was simple: *Lord, thy will be done and I pray that your will is pointing in the direction of Sony.* If all I got was a severance package from MGM, that wouldn't be bad at all, yet if I got a job at Sony, that would be incredible. It would allow me to continue developing as a studio executive, something I was really beginning to enjoy.

But I just couldn't take much more of limbo.

January 2005 came; we were releasing *Be Cool* in March. The Sony*-MGM sale was close to final, and there was a major meeting with the executives of both companies. One of the people in that meeting was Elizabeth, who was a close friend of Amy Pascal. After that meeting, Elizabeth called me down to her office and closed the door. "I just got back from the meeting at Sony," she said. "I have a message for you from Amy Pascal: Don't look for a job. You have one."

I was stunned. I wanted to do a holy dance all the way down the hall, but I waited until I got back to my office and then I started wondering. Elizabeth and I were going to be the only execs from our department to survive the transition? How was that possible? I understood why Elizabeth was going, but I was the person with the least seniority in my entire division. I had been the last person hired. Yet I

* To be clear, Sony Corporation, not Sony Pictures Entertainment, bought MGM.

was going to make the cut? All I could say was “Thank you, Jesus!” I knew he had intervened.

How ironic is it that I had started my journey with Will and JL at Overbrook, and now I was going to be at Sony, where their production company was housed? It was clearly part of a greater design that the Lord was bringing me back into relationship with them again. You can’t plan that.

IN YOUR CAREER, DEVELOPMENT Hell occurs when you reach a place where you stop progressing and might even feel as if things are going in reverse. Your company might be for sale the way mine was, and you might not know if your position will survive the sale. You may have taken on a big challenge and performed up to expectations but the promotion you thought was coming never came. You may be on the verge of being downsized because of the economy. Or your passion for your work might have simply run dry and you don’t know how to get it back. When you start to wonder why you’re putting in the long hours, when you get sick of waiting for your time to come, when you lose perspective, when it feels like life is on “repeat” . . . there’s a parking spot in Development Hell with your name on it.

Most of us have been in this position at one time or another. Your career is a three-act script, and in Hollywood the second act is the longest and potentially the most boring. If a script isn’t well developed to bring strong pacing and a sense of forward motion to Act Two, the entire movie can stall. The same thing can happen in your career. In Act One, when you first get a new position and possibly even begin a

profession you've spent years training for, you're naturally excited. Even the mundane parts of your work are interesting for a while.

But then some time passes. Reality sinks in. You realize that you're on a long, slow road to your future. You're not going to become CEO or manage your division overnight. The duties that were interesting when you were an enthusiastic novice have become drudgery. You start to doubt that God knows what he's doing. Surely, he has bigger things in mind for you than spending ten years as a junior account executive or assistant editor?

Be careful of that sort of thinking, because it will only make the pain of Development Hell more difficult to endure. One of the important things to remember about Development Hell is that it has little to do with what your opportunities actually are at the time and everything to do with *what you perceive those opportunities to be*. When I was on pins and needles for an entire year at MGM, I didn't need to be. If I'd put my full trust in God, I would have known that he had something in mind for me. That time was a phenomenal lesson in how God works in our lives. There was the way I was perceiving things—tense, frightening, and poised on the edge of disaster—and the way things really were, which was positive and validating.

It was my choice how I chose to look at my situation.

Most of us spend some time in Development Hell; it's part of the process of building a career. We all experience an intense period of doubt, tedium, and failure as we're learning. Every single one of us faces a hard dose of reality when we move from just dreaming to being in an environment where we have to work on making our dreams come to fruition.

When you go from a university to a “real” job or from an apprenticeship to being the master, it can be a shock. You find that you’re working harder than ever, sometimes without anyone to catch you when you stumble. You find that the glamour you thought your work would entail is easily balanced by routine and repetition. Or you work in your position for a year or two and wake up one day and surprise!—you’ve lost that lovin’ feeling for the profession you once thought you would want to be in for the rest of your days.

That’s normal; we’re all learning about ourselves in the ultimate on-the-job training. God will steer us into circumstances that will shape our character. But the danger grows the longer we *stay* in Development Hell, because we risk sending our dreams into *turnaround*.

When a film project goes into turnaround, the studio has officially given up on it after years of development. The idea we first loved is gone and the project is dead. The studio stops paying any expenses and puts the project in turnaround so that another studio can buy it and develop it if they choose.

The longer we spend in Development Hell, the stronger the urge to put our hopes in turnaround. We want to give up. We lose faith and say, “Lord, it’s not going to happen.” Remember, we are stuck in the present and we tend to judge the progress we’re making toward our goals by what is happening *today*. If we get the promotion today, it’s time for a party. If our boss passes over us in favor of someone else, then we want to close the shades and mope. What we often lack is a *big-picture* view of things; we forget that we can’t know what God has working for us in the future. It’s important to retain some perspective on our suffering and to tell ourselves over and over that things can turn on a dime, and often do.

People really believe something only after the fact, and that's where faith comes in.

We don't have to know what's going to happen, we just have to trust that God will not leave us without hope.

If you are in Development Hell, don't throw in the towel. You're probably not as far away from Production as you might think. You might be just one scene away from where you want to be. Think of the bathroom scene in *The Pursuit of Happyness* where Chris Gardner had nowhere to take his little boy for the night, so they had to camp out in a subway station bathroom. That was the low point of his journey, and it would have been easy for him to say, "Enough. I quit." But if he had given up then, he would have never gotten the stock-trading job that changed his life forever. Instead, he went back into the office the next day with as much hope as he could muster, and his determination not to give up was what he needed to endure the hell he was going through.

Remember that the movie was based on a true story. Chris Gardner really faced all that fear, homelessness, and uncertainty, kept faith, and triumphed. If he could do it, so can you.

PROJECTS DON'T LANGUISH IN Development Hell because people don't like them anymore. In fact, it's usually the exact opposite. Many times it's because the studio and filmmakers can see a good idea beneath the surface of the script, but are having difficulty figuring out the story. Obviously, the idea is promising enough that the studio has spent years, effort, and money trying to crack the script. One of my bosses has been developing the classic pirate adventure

story *Sinbad and the Seven Seas* for years and will not give up on it because he knows that one day it will become a movie. But sometimes a project just has to wait for that fresh perspective or big idea that will unlock its potential.

God is just like this with us: Even when we don't see the potential in ourselves, he does. No matter how much hell this life has taken us through, he knows the dream he placed with us and will not give up on us. He knows that one day our dream or idea will impact the world. But even when you accept this and you aren't ready to give up on your goal, what happens when your employer has put you in turnaround? You've gotten demoted, or worse, you've lost your job. If you've been put in turnaround through no fault of your own, it says nothing about the quality of the work you have done. The great irony (as a dear friend of mine says) is that some of the biggest hit movies were picked up out of turnaround. Being put in turnaround isn't the end of the world.

Which movies am I talking about?

How about *Forrest Gump* (grossed \$677 million worldwide and won the Oscar for Best Picture)?

How about *Slumdog Millionaire* (grossed \$377 million worldwide and won the Oscar for Best Picture)?

That's not good enough for you?

How about *Twilight*?

The blockbuster teen vampire romance franchise was picked up out of turnaround from Paramount. Even though the books were major best sellers, no one thought they could make the films work. So far, the *Twilight* films combined have grossed almost \$2 billion worldwide; it's one of the most successful film franchises in history.

Want more evidence that turnaround isn't such a big deal? Well, consider that Frank Price, a famous Columbia executive, passed on *E.T. Star Wars* was passed on. The rights to *The Lord of the Rings* sold to Universal in the 1970s but New Line ended up making it with director Peter Jackson. Those three films earned seventeen Academy Awards and grossed more than \$2.9 billion worldwide.

The lesson? Even if one company misses the value in a project, it doesn't mean that another won't see it and take advantage. Don't worry if one company doesn't or didn't see your value and true potential. God does. And because he does, he already has the company or opportunity that will pick you up out of turnaround and put you back on the path to even bigger success. He has you in your industry for a reason, and if things are at a seeming dead end with your current employer, it only means that greater opportunity awaits you elsewhere.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR employer is giving you chances to advance and do your best work but you buy your own one-way ticket to Development Hell? When things stagnate, it can be because you've stopped caring about your work. You're "phoning it in" and just punching the clock. You're probably not doing what you're passionate about, and when that happens, it's virtually impossible to put the best of yourself into what you do.

As I've shared, I've had days when I felt as if there would never be another opportunity coming my way. Nobody wants to work beneath their potential; it's a miserable, life-

less way to spend a career. If that's the reason you're in Development Hell, it's time to look in the mirror. Clearly, God has a path prepared for you, but are you on it? In landing in your current position, did you pay attention to the signs that God sent indicating where and how to best use your talents? Or did you freelance, deciding that the company or line of work God was directing you toward wasn't interesting and you would rather do something else instead? That's losing faith. That's trusting in your own wisdom and placing it above the Lord's wisdom. When you do that—when you dig in your heels and resist his attempts to lead you in a certain direction—you miss out on his blessings.

In a self-created Development Hell, we have two options: *straighten up* or *get out*. Remember, God sees what is in our futures, so he knew that you would resist his will and end up in a job where you feel unhappy and directionless. Why? Because he wants you to learn something. Either you stick with your current job for a while and vow to do your best and learn whatever it has to teach, or you humble yourself, admit your error, leave your job, and turn yourself over to God's will. Pray and pay attention; he will guide you out of Development Hell.

When you finally escape, listen to your passion. We frequently forget that the passion we feel—for law or finance, teaching or repairing classic cars—is placed in us by God. Each is a spiritual seed that will one day bear fruit and bring us to the career we were meant to have. Listen to the voice of your passion and it won't lead you astray.

* * *

IS DEVELOPMENT HELL INEVITABLE? Some movies must breeze through the process without ever getting stuck in endless rewrites, right?

Sure. It happens. But it's rare. For one thing, every studio develops far more ideas and scripts than it will ever produce. We do it for a simple reason: some films won't ever pan out, and we need to have multiple projects in the pipeline so that for every three that go into turnaround, we have one or two that can move into production. So most movies at some point will wind up in Development Hell. The key question is, do they stay there? The success stories don't. They either sell to another studio that finds the combination to unlock the magic in the story, or someone at the original studio has a brilliant idea that saves the day and the project moves ahead.

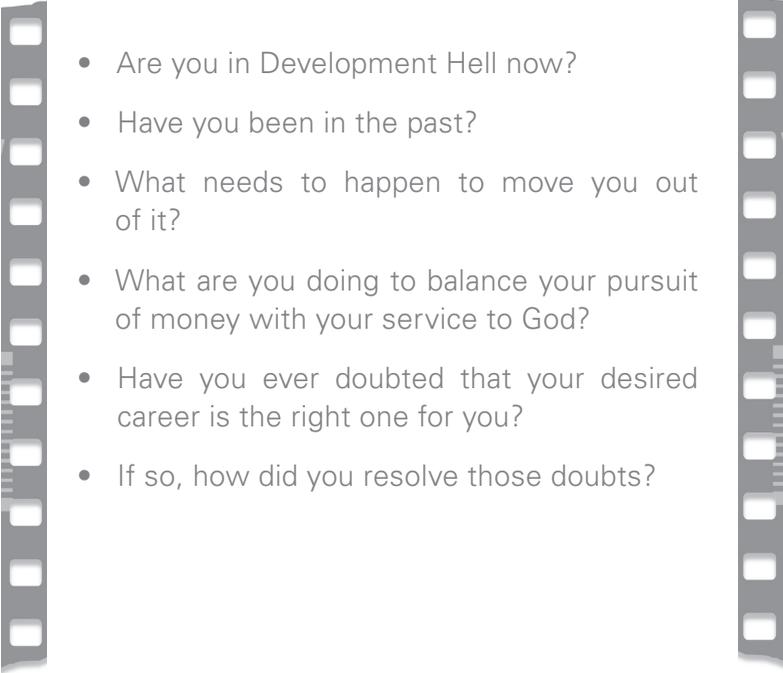
You'll probably spend some time in Development Hell; most of us do. If it doesn't come in the form of missed opportunity, then it might manifest as an ethical crisis or boredom with your duties. But when you do reach that stage, the key to dealing with it is staying the course and being steadfast in your faith. The risk is that you will ditch your purpose and take shortcuts to advance by any means possible. That practically guarantees that you'll be taking up long-term residence in Development Hell, because you will not be able to receive God's blessings in the way he has planned.

If you can keep your eyes looking ahead even when the difficult times come, you will accept God's decision to put you through the purifier of Development Hell in order to mold your ambition, integrity, and perspective. Don't abandon what makes you who you are. Don't give up hope.

God will pull you out of Development Hell soon enough, and you will move ahead into the next scene of your life. You will be ready to make a powerful, lasting impact on the world.

One of the most effective tools I've discovered which can help you manage the tough times is to *remember*. We have a tendency to forget how good God has been to us. Think back over all the scenes of your life. Think about the times when you needed God the most—did he ever let you down? If you're like me, then not only did God come through for you in your past, but every time he did, he exceeded your expectations! If he did it before, then he will do it again. Let your past experiences with him bring you comfort and confidence to keep moving forward.

When you feel trapped in Development Hell, also think about steps you can take to help you manage this difficult period. Attend events where you can network with people. Take training courses to become even better at your job. Pitch your boss on a creative new idea. Take on a project no one else will accept. Propose a daring solution to a long-standing problem. These tactics all keep you on God's road while bringing new energy and purpose to your work. Keep the faith and keep your sense of perspective and, believe it or not, Development Hell will ultimately seem like time well spent.

- 
- Are you in Development Hell now?
 - Have you been in the past?
 - What needs to happen to move you out of it?
 - What are you doing to balance your pursuit of money with your service to God?
 - Have you ever doubted that your desired career is the right one for you?
 - If so, how did you resolve those doubts?

For more information
visit
<http://producedbyfaith.com>
or
<http://books.simonandschuster.com>