



LINKS PLAYERS DAILY DEVOTIONAL

Links Players

THE MYSTERY OF GOLF

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:5)

I doubt you've read *The Mystery of Golf*, written in 1908 by Theodore Haultain, a Canadian writer who, like me, fancied himself a golfer. In it, he explores man's age-old love affair with golf and declares it incurable.

Just as players size up a putt from all angles, Haultain examines golf from the physiology of the perfect swing, the psychology of a sport in which the opponent is oneself, and the peculiar brand of spirituality that leads people around eighteen holes with the promise of nothing more than "almost."

The Mystery of Golf probably won't help shave strokes off your game. He concludes that the game/sport/act of insanity comes down to "just hitting the ball" by meeting the single requirement of keeping your eye on the ball by differentiating between the game being simple and being easy.

The distance the ball must travel to the hole ups the ante on the physiological challenge of keeping our eye on it... even as it lies right at your feet. The physical becomes the psychological because "Golf is a flawless mirror for the way human expectation of perfection is persistently foiled by human capacity for humiliation."

Part of the mystery of golf is why we insist on playing it so inadequately. Just as the mystery of life is why we insist on living so imperfectly. The mystery teaches us that the confession of our imperfection... keeping our eye on the ball of reality, so to speak... is how we develop spiritual discipline and experience joy.

Golf is played with others but always against ourselves and our nature. "Golf is a test not so much of the muscle or even the brains and nerves as it is a test of our inmost self, of soul and spirit, of character and disposition... temperament... habit of mind... mental and moral nature," he writes.

Haultain believes that the rules of golf contain the 10 Commandments. He drafts a list of "thou shall nots" whose violation leads to the revelation of character flaws so serious that they would necessitate going to confession.

While Haultain shies away from the word sin, his examination of the mystery of golf leads to contemplating the game of golf as an exercise in virtue. He quotes an early Church father, Gregory of Nyssa: "The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God."

Haultain does not explicitly claim godliness as a golfer's goal but notes that golf, like God, is a jealous master. "The virtue of attention is essential," he says, "to properly do what we are called to do in golf and, by extension, in the life of faith."

"If you can so thoroughly control yourself... as to always look steadfastly at your ball till after you have actually hit it, this will enable you to... be your true, quiet, self-confident self throughout the game," he writes. "Failure to develop such virtue can leave us like the blind man in the Gospels who said, 'Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.' "

That's worth thinking about before and well after we hit the literal and proverbial ball.

A Biblical Prayer for Forgiveness: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. (Psalm 51:1)

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Bill Crawford

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