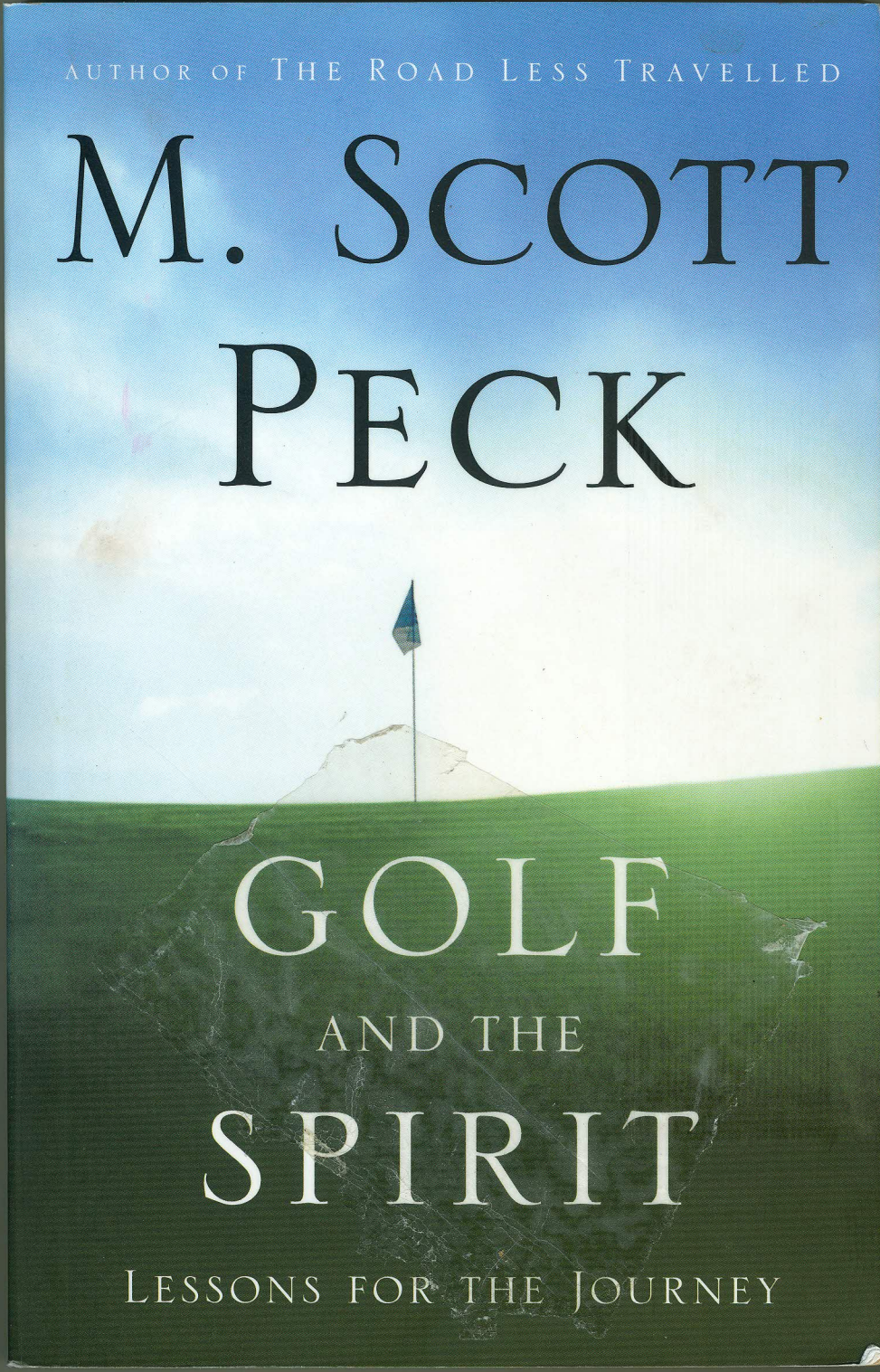


AUTHOR OF THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

M. SCOTT  
PECK



GOLF  
AND THE  
SPIRIT

LESSONS FOR THE JOURNEY

In *Golf and the Spirit*, M. Scott Peck writes a book for beginners and masters alike – and even for nongolfers. It goes beyond the mechanics to explore the deeper issues, ways of successfully managing the emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of this most wonderful, maddening, deflating, and inspiring game.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**M**. Scott Peck, M.D., is the author of many best-selling books, including *The Road Less Travelled*, which has spent more than twelve years on the *New York Times* best-seller list. He lives in northwestern Connecticut.

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# GOLF AND THE SPIRIT

LESSONS FOR THE JOURNEY

M. SCOTT PECK, M.D.

*Illustrated by Christopher Peck*



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TO  
BARB AND WALLY WEITZ,  
WONDERFUL FRIENDS,  
FINE PHILANTHROPISTS,  
AND  
GOLFING PARTNERS EXTRAORDINAIRE

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## *THE BACK NINE*

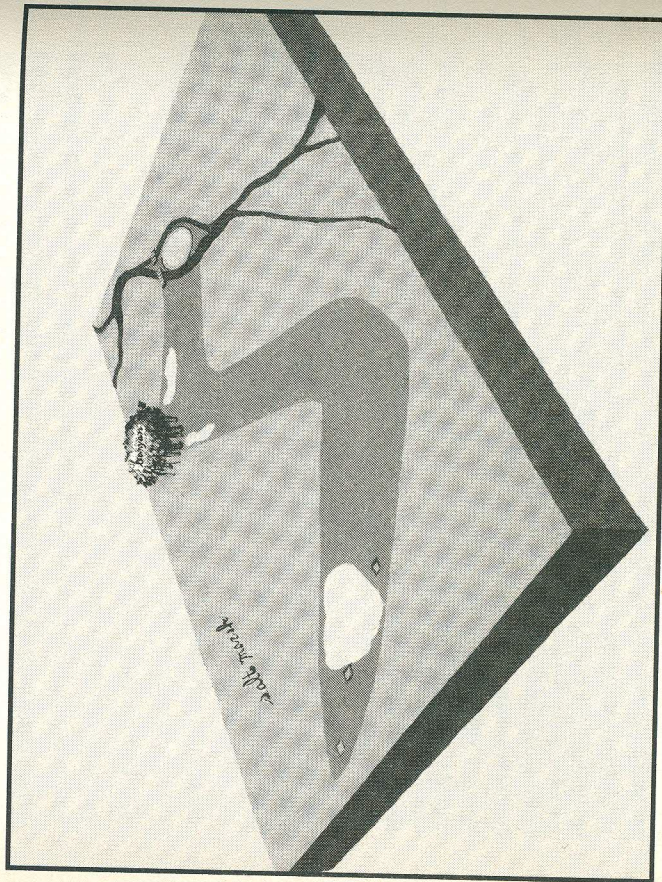
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*Belief is a free choice. I believe God is a Person.  
By this I mean that He has a personality  
and we have a personal relationship.*

H O L E 1 8

## GOD



We have now come to the final hole. Since golf is so nonlinear, seldom in the sport is there ever anything that could truly be called a climax. Nonetheless, a certain sense of climax comes with the last hole of the round, and on Exotica this hole has been designed to be as climactic as possible. It is a dramatically difficult 610-yard par-5 double dogleg. These two doglegs wend their way through a salt marsh to the green, which is situated right in front of the long verandah of the clubhouse—where anybody who cares to can watch your finish. Moreover, the green is surrounded on all four sides by channels of water that create the inflow (or outflow) of the pond on hole 15 (the one with the alligators). Consequently, the green is actually a tiny island—a dramatic finish indeed.

On the circuit they sometimes refer to this as the “pro’s hole.” That is because it is possible to hit an unobstructed shot from the bend in the first dogleg, totally bypassing the second, directly toward the green—a 270-yard shot, and if you are to hit 270 yards across the marsh so that the ball lands on a little island, you must indeed be a professional.

Should you manage to make such a phenomenal shot, landing on the green in two (one under regulation), it will be a moment of glory.



But remember that perfection is relative, and hence so is glory. For me, were I to hit my third shot from the bend of the second dogleg and make it to the green, that would be glory. In fact, I would be so exhilarated and surprised by the glory, I would probably screw it up by three- or four-putting.

Glory is not only a relative but a profound phenomenon. Whenever we "achieve" some kind of glory, we are likely to think of it as ours. But we will be mistaken. I think that we are spiritually and psychologically off base—and in grave danger—whenever we think of glory as our own. Glory is an attribute of God. If we happen to end up this last hole "in glory," the glory should properly belong to God.

I have upon occasion vaguely wished that I could write something that was not about God, but I cannot. When I come down to the essentials, there is no part of life in which I do not see the hand of God. To cover virtually any subject fully, I simply cannot leave Him or Her out of the picture—even if it is golf.

Now, it is not my intention, on this last hole of the round, to cram God down anyone's throat. I dislike vomit, and only vomit would be the result of an attempt to do so. With but a few caveats, I am a deep believer in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which provides for the free exercise of religion. What that amendment means, among other things, is that not only are we free to believe in whatever kind of God we choose, but we are also free to not believe: to have no truck whatsoever with any notion of divinity. The amendment accepts, even encourages, religious diversity.

But why is there such diversity? The basic reason, I suspect, is mystery—and the different ways we handle mystery. For some of us life is such a mysterious business that we have difficulty handling it without resorting to notions of the divine. For others the behavior of God is so mysterious that we have difficulty handling the facts without discounting notions of divinity altogether. And some of us fall in between.

Perhaps the only intellectual sin is to proclaim that there is no mystery at all. Few serious golfers have been guilty of it. In the best commentaries of quotes about golf that I know, appreciation for the mystery of the game is the predominant theme. One of them begins by

quoting a PGA veteran, Dave Marr, as saying: "You can never own the secret of golf. You just try to borrow it from time to time."<sup>1</sup> Or as another great golfer, Ben Crenshaw, said about the game, "There's no way you can ever get it."<sup>2</sup>

Certainly you do not have to believe in God to play golf—even great golf. Nonetheless, I suspect it helps—at least to justify the extraordinary amount of time you may expend upon the sport. How else to justify it except to believe that it's somehow good for the soul? And how might you justify the existence of the soul without resorting to the existence of some kind of divinity?

But there is all this diversity. Adlai Stevenson once put it this way: "Some of us worship in churches, some in synagogues, some on golf courses."<sup>3</sup>

Most would probably think that God and golf have absolutely nothing to do with each other. Yet were you to analyze all the jokes about golf, I suspect that you would find at least half of them are religious. The most typical ones have God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit teeing off as a threesome on the first tee. Or perhaps it will be a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi teeing off on the fifth. These jokes mostly seem to center on luck, either good or bad.

This is not surprising. Nowhere are good and bad luck more apparent than on the golf course. Luck is the norm. On the one hand, you may land one inch short of the green and have an unplayable lie in a cavernous sand trap. Just one inch more, and you would have "had" glory. On the other hand, you may hit an atrocious hook way to the left of the green, which hits the trunk of a tree and bounces not only onto the green but conceivably even into the cup. The luck involved may be so dramatic that it is only natural to assume either heavenly or demonic intervention.

But I think that such an assumption would be wrong. Attributing good or bad luck to spiritual forces is, to my mind, a most primitive form of religious thinking. Unlike subtler phenomena, such as being in the flow, luck—good or bad—is just that: luck. Chance. And I myself doubt that God has anything to do with it.

Then where does God fit in? I don't know. It is trite to say that God is mysterious, but the reason that I keep saying it is that in absolutely no

area of golf—or life—can I be totally certain of God's involvement. The only thing about God of which I can be totally certain is the places where He is not involved, where He doesn't fit in. And so it is in this regard—not luck—that I will tell you my favorite religious joke about golf.

A golfer loved golf more than anything in the world. Consequently, he was very good at it. But he was also obsessed by the game, and he therefore generally neglected his family, his friends, and his spiritual life. It is hardly remarkable, therefore, that when he died he went to Hell. At the entrance to Hell, he was greeted by the devil. The devil, dressed in a smart sports coat and slacks, could not have been more urbane. "Welcome to Hell," the devil said to the golfer. "We're delighted to have you here. It's my purpose to make your stay as comfortable as possible. Anything you need, just ask for it. I and my whole staff are entirely at your disposal."

Although the golfer realized that he was in Hell, he was astonished by the pleasantness of it all. Unlike his stereotypes, the devil seemed such an obliging chap that the golfer was emboldened to inquire, "You don't happen to have any golf courses down here, do you?"

"Golf courses?" the devil echoed. "Of course we have golf courses here in Hell! We have the best golf courses in the entire universe! Here, let me show you." And so the devil led him off to a golf club, which looked for all the world like a magnificent southern plantation, with four eighteen-hole courses going off in each direction—a north course, a south course, a west course, and an east course—all perfectly trapped and manicured.

The golfer was now encouraged almost to the point of ecstasy. "You don't happen to have clubs down here in Hell, do you?" he inquired.

"Clubs?" the devil responded. "Why, of course! We have the most exquisitely balanced clubs in the universe. Come, let me show you."

And so the devil led the golfer into the clubhouse to a huge room that was lined by set after set of golf clubs. The golfer tried several. They were indeed exquisitely balanced. He could have picked any of them, but he chose one that felt particularly right. Next to the door was standing a whole group of young lads eagerly ready to caddy. He put his newly selected set of clubs into a lovely bag, handed it to the brightest-

looking caddy, and then said to the devil, "Now if you would just give me a ball, I will be off."

"Ball?" the devil responded. "Ball? We don't have any balls here. That's the hell of it."

The story may be funny, but it is as pointed as any one I know. The golfer who went to Hell did so because he was an addict, and in his addiction he had neglected his family and other important matters. Particularly he had neglected God.

All forms of addiction may be looked upon as varieties of idolatry. The heroin addict makes an idol of heroin and the pleasure it gives him. The alcoholic makes an idol of the bottle. The golfer in question made an idol of golf. Idolatry is the violation of the first commandment, which is very specific: "I am the Lord thy God, and thou shalt not have any other gods before me." But golf had become his god, and what greater poetic justice could there be for him than to have all the accoutrements of golf except a ball?

After saying I didn't believe that God had anything to do with luck on the golf course, I asked the question "Then where does God fit in?" The problem with the golfer who went to Hell was that God did not fit into his picture. He had lost his sense of perspective. As long as we think that God fits somewhere into the game, and we remember to have no other god before Him or Her, we will seldom allow ourselves to let golf get out of perspective.

Now for a story that seemingly has nothing to do with golf.<sup>4</sup> A wealthy New York City man died, leaving a large estate. Part of that estate was some land in Louisiana. The prestigious New York City law firm managing his estate wrote to a law firm in New Orleans asking them to do a title search on the Louisiana property. Three weeks later the New York City firm received a report tracing the title back to 1803.

At this point the New York lawyer handling the estate wrote back to the New Orleans lawyer that the estate was more complicated than he had first assumed, and would the New Orleans firm be so kind as to trace the property title back before 1803. One week later the New York lawyer received the following letter:

Dear Sir:

We are in receipt of your request to trace the title of the property in question back before 1803. The property was acquired in 1803 by the U.S. through purchase from France. France in turn had acquired the property from Spain in 1801 as a part of the spoils of war. Spain had originally obtained the property in question through discovery made by a Genovese sailor sailing under the aegis of Queen Isabella of Spain and with the blessing of Pope Innocent VIII, who was the Vicar of Christ, who is the Son of the Almighty God who, gentlemen, created Louisiana.

As we hit down this last fairway, it may help us to remember that God created the island of Exotica. Such remembrances will also help us keep matters in perspective. Indeed, we might want to go a bit further. While the majority of authorities believe that golf was invented in Scotland, there are two minority views. One traces it back to at least the thirteenth century, when the Dutch used to play a similar game on ice. The other holds that we really don't have the foggiest idea who invented the game. Sometimes I like to toy with the notion that maybe it was God who invented golf.

The concept of God as Creator—of the universe, of the world, of Exotica, and perhaps even of golf—does not necessarily imply a currently active God. A very large number of people think of God—if they think of Her at all—as a clockmaker who designed and created the whole scheme of things, wound it up like a clock, set it in motion, and then retired on Her pension plan some hundreds, thousands, millions, or billions of years ago.<sup>5</sup> As I indicated, however, my own version is that of an active God, although I can in no way tell you precisely how my mysterious God might intervene on the golf course. While I mildly discounted the notion, I still cannot prove that God has nothing to do with it when we get in the flow. And while I am uncertain, I did suggest that God may well be involved in those rare moments of certainty when we believe that we can pull off a difficult shot, and then against all odds proceed to do so.

But God may intervene in other ways as well. For instance, although I have been paired with some disagreeable partners on the

course, I have also been paired with a few great teachers at just the right time for me. It is an old mystical saying that "when you are ready for your next teacher, he will appear." This has been my experience too frequently to ignore. There are some other ways to explain it, but on these occasions it has seemed to me that I was feeling the hand of God at work.

On the last hole I offered a little trick about how I may help myself to stay in the flow by not taking any unnecessary practice swings. There is another possible "trick" to stay in the flow that I have never tried: simply to pray.

The reason I have never tried it is that on one level it does seem like a trick. God has enough on Her mind without me bothering Her with such a prosaic and utterly unimportant matter. No less a religious light than Billy Graham has addressed the issue by saying: "I never pray on a golf course. Actually, the Lord answers my prayers everywhere except on the course."<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, the next time I am in the flow, I may very well remember to pray for God's help to stay in it. The fact is, it would not be crass for me to do so; it would be humble. I have a big tendency to pray to God from only a very mature position, without wanting to seem childish about the whole thing. Yet Jesus said, "Except ye be as little children, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Oh yes, as the world sees it, it would be most childish for me to pray for such a simple thing as to stay in the flow. But Jesus also said, "Ask and you shall receive." We mature men often have problems asking for things, like directions. I think it is just possible that it might be good for my spiritual life to be childish and humble enough to ask God to help me along a little bit on the course. And I think it is possible that God might even be sufficiently pleased in my doing so. She wouldn't regard it as a trick but rather as a mutual opportunity for the two of us. Anyway, I'm trying to screw up my courage to ask the next time I'm in the flow.

While I've not yet been childlike or courageous enough to ask God for help on the golf course, I do talk with Him. I do so out loud on those occasions when I'm playing as a single, when I'm alone and no one can hear me or think me weird. "Well, we didn't do so well on that one, did we, God?" is what I say most frequently. But sometimes I also get to say,

"Well, we managed to pull that one off, didn't we, Lord? Thank you." Does God listen to this sort of "dribble"? I honestly don't know. The reason I wouldn't talk out loud in this way if I was playing with anyone else is that I wouldn't want them to think I have an "imaginary companion." We are supposed to leave our imaginary companions behind along about the time we are five or so. Actually, I don't think God is my imaginary companion—I just don't want other people to think so. Still, when I am playing alone, there are times when God and I have a lot of fun together.

Why shouldn't God have fun with me on the course?

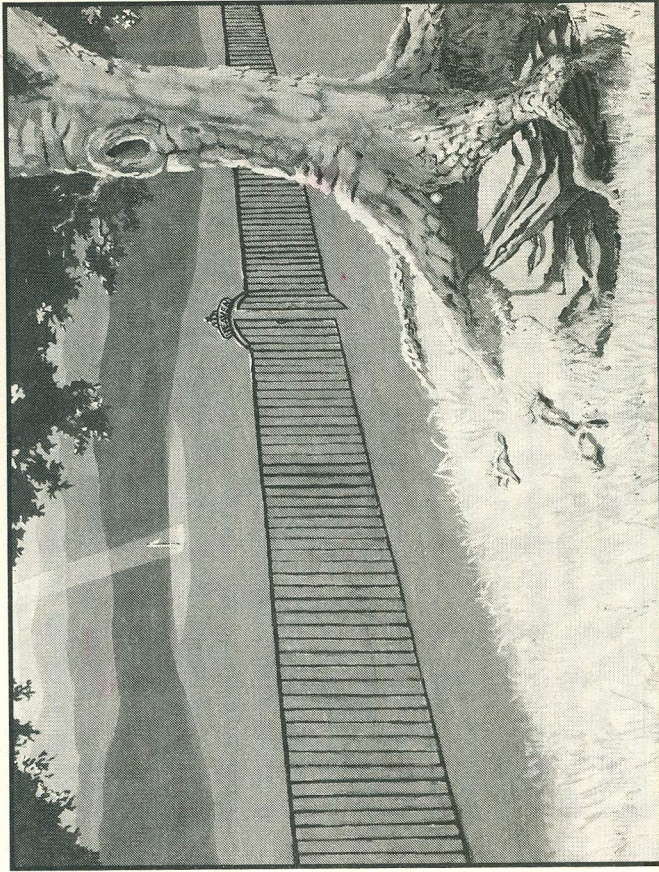
One of the few things I know about God for certain is that He has a sense of humor. As soon as I think I've got something all figured out, God (or life, if you will) comes along and says, "But what about this, Scotty?" And I'm more or less back to square one. Indeed, God con- found me with such regularity in all aspects of my life, I can only assume He takes certain playful delight in doing so.

This experience of being confounded is one that all golfers share—at least on the course. As but one example, as soon as I start hitting my long irons well, my woods go to hell. Or vice versa. And if by some chance I begin hitting both well, then I can no longer putt worth a damn. The commonality of this complaint is such that it echoes through the locker rooms of every golf clubhouse on the face of the earth.

Earlier I quoted the pro Ben Crenshaw as saying about golf: "There's no way you can ever get it." He was referring to this confounding. Actually, what he said in its entirety was: "Golf is the hardest game in the world. There's no way you can ever get it. Just when you think you do, the game jumps up and puts you into your place."

The notion of God as a "trickster" of sorts—particularly on the golf course—was explicitly expressed by another famous pro, Tommy Bolt. Once after missing a number of putts during a major championship, Bolt turned to the sky and cried, "Come down here and fight like a man."<sup>7</sup>

In any case, a significant number of very serious theologians of many different religions have reached a tentative supposition that the universe in general and humanity in particular are God's "play." Certainly we humans are most likely to be cocreators with God when we can envison life as a "game." Sometimes it is a very serious game.



Sometimes it can and should be quite lighthearted. In any case, we might look at golf as the symbol of God's play. He is having fun with it. Yet on the serious side He is also teaching us a great deal. At the risk of being repetitive, let me say that I cannot think of any game better calculated to teach us the very spiritual virtues that God most wants us to learn: humility, patience, precision, balance, and alertness, as well as the never-ending practice of kenosis.

I began this chapter with a brief mention of glory, describing how, if I were to hit from the bend of the second dogleg a 180-yard drive to land on the green, I would experience just as much glory as the pro hitting from the first bend of the dogleg.

I doubt that I would be able to make such a glorious shot. But little in golf is predictable. Many are the beginners who have played dreadfully yet made one good shot on the last hole, thereby forever becoming hooked on the game. (Maybe the commonality of this occurrence is yet another example of God's playful intervention.) I myself, however, am not a novice. A typical mediocre player, my game is highly erratic. Chances are that during this round I've had a few good holes and a few bad ones. It may well be that until now I've had a string of bad ones. Indeed, I may have already judged the round to be a terrible one. But in the words of Yogi Berra about baseball, "It's not over until it's over." So also with golf. No matter how lousy my score, I may make one last good shot. Maybe just one last good putt. I will not end up in glory in the world's terms, yet I may still return home feeling a tiny touch of it.

The feeling of glory is so thrilling, it is addicting. Way back on hole 4 I noted that the flight of a well-hit golf ball will give us that thrill and suggested it as a major reason for golf's addictive quality. This addiction is not necessarily bad, but it can be dangerous if it becomes uncontrollable. Remember that full-blown addictions are forms of idolatry. The addict of whatever kind is chasing after some relatively cheap and easy substitute for the real God. But the real God cannot be captured—not in a bottle, not in sex, not in political power, and not in golf. God is bigger than us. He is not ours to control.

So we cannot "get" God on a golf course. What we can get on the course are certain intimations of Him. One of those intimations comes from the fact that we cannot "get" golf either. Or life, for that matter.

Someone once said, "Life is not so much a problem to be solved as a mystery to be lived." The same could also be said of golf and God. Nonetheless, an intimation of God and Her glory in the game of golf comes in confronting obstacles.

Much of golf—and hence this book—is about obstacles. The list I have mentioned is almost endless: sand traps, narrows, out-of-bounds marshes, trees, forests, moguls, gulches and canyons, uneven lies, deep rough, cultivated rough, ocean water, pond and stream water, pitched or rolling or tiered greens, rain and wind, et cetera, et cetera. Even more, this book has been about the host of all-too-human internal obstacles that prevent us from easily sailing past, through, or over those external ones. Again the list seems endless and torturous: our eagerness, excessive striving, pride, shame, laziness, anger at others, anger at ourselves, depression, perfectionism, narcissism, obsession with score, fearfulness, overconfidence, underconfidence, inattentiveness, lack of alertness, et cetera, et cetera.

Among its many other permutations, glory seems to have at least something to do with overcoming obstacles—particularly those that are within ourselves. Yet true glory, I remind you, is more God's than ours. As with a pro who has just won a major tournament, we may experience a fleeting moment of glory—without any reference to God whatsoever—whenever we temporarily end up with an exceptionally good score. A greater feeling of glory, however, can come only in relationship to God.<sup>8</sup> It can come even to a mediocre player like myself, when I have done no more than break 90 but know I have done so not just through blind luck but through some overcoming of obstacles. It comes at the end of a long round—or a life—when a strangely quiet yet definably exterior voice says to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant. In you I am well pleased."

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