Culture



Rory McIlroy, of Northern Ireland, hits from the pine straw on the 18th hole during the final round of the Masters golf tournament at the Augusta National Golf Club, Sunday, April 12, 2026, in Augusta, Georgia. (AP photo/Gerald Herbert)



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When my father took me to play golf for my 10th birthday at some nine-hole course in the middle of an Indiana cornfield, I looked at him after the round and said, "That was the best day of my life."

Growing up in the basketball-obsessed state of Indiana, I learned early on I'd have to denounce that religion; it's tough to make the team when puberty waits until your junior summer to deem you fit for transformation. But through the awkwardness of my pip-squeak existence, I always had golf, a sport where work ethic eats physicality for breakfast.

I watched Tiger Woods win the Masters at Augusta National in 2001, 2002 and 2005. I filled my golf bag with Nike balls and tees, and asked for red polo shirts for Christmas. Through high school and college, I worked for $8.50 an hour at a golf course two cornfields over (a proper Hoosier measurement) so that I could play for free. Huck Finn had the Mississippi River; I had Deer Creek Golf Club.

I now realize that golf was my first entry into the inner life. Golf's immensely personal nature leaves the dedicated with no choice but to confront one's patterns of thinking and emotion. I credit golf — an inherently imperfect game where each round is filled mostly with shots you've missed — as the catalyst for learning how to manage my perfectionism.

My grandfather, who gave me my first golf club when I was young, was the only avid golfer in my family. Watching the Masters with him through the years cemented Augusta National as a type of heaven in my mind as incomprehensible as the celestial realms themselves. Now that I've been there, it's even more incomprehensible.

When my friend invited me to attend the Friday round at this year's Masters, I confessed to him that tears welled up in my eyes upon receiving his text. When my wife came home from work, I emerged from my office beaming uncontrollably, hands raised like Rocky Balboa, "We did it!"

For golfers, Augusta is pilgrimage. And, as is the case with any pilgrimage, spiritual lessons abound.



Rory McIlroy, of Northern Ireland, hits his tee shot on the 12th hole during the third round of the Masters golf tournament at the Augusta National Golf Club, Saturday, April 11, 2026, in Augusta, Georgia. (AP photo/Matt Slocum)

There is much that could be said about the beauty of the grounds of Augusta National — the expert pruning of their azaleas, the group of volunteers that fills every divot taken, the perfection of their fairways and radiant, white crushed-quartz bunkers. But one rule heightens your awareness of the beauty: no phones.

I like to think I'm fairly unattached to my phone. My Franciscan spirituality challenges me to aim for presence, but still I found myself longing to take photos. The fact that you can't do so is its own lesson: Detachment can deepen the power of your senses — a power we have forgotten in a culture that is all about capturing moments rather than being captured by them.

In the Franciscan tradition, the senses are their own pathways to the divine. As my friend and teacher, the late Franciscan Fr. Dan Riley, once wrote, "Experiential

learning calls out for practices and habits of reflection and integration. But we arrived at this truth, not through our intellect first, but through our senses." In *No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Merton wrote that some people never see a tree until they think of cutting it down; or, in today's verbiage, until they post it on social media. Augusta would undoubtedly benefit from allowing patrons to take photos of its grounds, but instead you are invited to simply enjoy it as gift, as grace, as splendor.

As Father Dan once said to me as we marveled at a sunset on a cross-country road trip we took together, "That's the thing about beauty, it lifts your heart toward praise."

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I have coached girls and boys high school golf in Charlotte, North Carolina, for a decade, and our state association now requires our players to do live scoring on their phones each match and tournament. Anytime they input their score from a hole, they can peek at the live leaderboard and compare themselves to their peers. But at Augusta, the biggest golf tournament on the planet, the game is played and enjoyed as it was meant to be.

The Masters Instagram account — I would argue, the most contemplative sports page on the Internet — echoes the sensory experience that is Augusta. Click on almost any video and notice the calming of your nervous system. When Rory McIlroy won this year's Masters, they posted a lengthy video of his walk from No. 18 to the scoring tent. All you can see is his emotion, and all you can hear are the noises of the crowd as he walks. Nothing else. Just pure human emotion.

Real, dignified human effort marks the culture of this competition. It would be easy for all the scoreboards at Augusta to be digital; instead, volunteers update the names and scores manually, as has been done for almost a century. It would be easy to incorporate self-checkout in their famed concession houses, where egg salad and pimento sandwiches are $1.50 (according to my credit card statement, I ate 14 pieces of bread on April 10). Instead, you're greeted by a smiling person telling you to have a good day. I began to wonder if I was even on planet Earth. Maybe our car flew off the interstate somewhere between Columbia and Augusta.

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Augusta makes you wonder if you've been living your life all wrong. What was that roar of applause? Maybe it was on 6. Or maybe it was 16. Maybe it was 9. Or maybe it was 18. Better check the Masters app on my phone — oh wait, I can't. Better walk a quarter-mile north to the nearest scoreboard. Meh, that seems like a lot of work. Maybe I'll just wait and enjoy where I'm at right now. Why must I be all-knowing? Does our tendency to look up everything rob us of the present? Should knowing replace experiencing?

Life is hard, grueling and confusing. It is filled with imperfections which seem to absorb our mental energy. But Augusta is a reminder that life, more than I dare realize, is also a utopia at times: filled with the beauty of the natural world, with people and stories, with moments we're invited to enjoy with the fullness of our senses.

After Rory parred No. 16 on Friday, we folded our green Masters chairs and exited the grounds. I draped my arms around my friends and gasped, "What a day." I thought of my grandfather, and of the words I said to my father 28 years before about a crazy, maddening, beautiful game that would, in some way, make me into the husband, father, writer and coach I am today.