

Passing Behind Our Backs.”Everyone’s Life has a Shape, as if it Were a Drawing or Story or Song”

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*I never met the great basketball player, **Bob Cousy**, the man known as “the Houdini of the Hardwood,” yet he somehow influenced my life in ways I never knew, or to be more accurate, in ways I didn’t reflect upon except in superficial ways. He was the guy who brought professional basketball into the modern era with his bag of fancy tricks that included no-look and behind-the-back passes, uncanny dribbling, and a magical court sense that made the fast break into an exquisite art form. The captain and point-guard of the Boston Celtics from 1950-1963, Cousy led the Celtics to six NBA titles, made thirteen all-star teams, and changed professional basketball from a stodgy, boring, and slow game into a fast-paced spectacle, entertainment as much as sport. He was a wizard with a basketball and set the stage for Guy Rodgers, “Pistol Pete” Maravich, Bob Dylan, Magic Johnson, and Steve Nash, among other tricksters, modern Hermes.*

Over the years I have written a great deal on a very wide-range of topics, but it wasn’t until a friend from high school recently sent me Gary Pomeranz’s fascinating book, *The Last Pass: Cousy, Russell, the Celtics, and What Matters in the End*, that something clicked for me. A few weeks previously, as the weather had turned spring-like, I had started to shoot hoops at our basket in the driveway. The warm air, the feel of a loose flowing freedom as I dribbled and shot, brought me back to the days when I spent so many hours playing in the Bronx schoolyards of my youth, perfecting my skills in what I can only call a fanatical way. Rushing to the schoolyard after school and on Saturday mornings to be the first there, to command the court, to compete with the older guys and beat their asses. Traveling around the city’s best basketball neighborhoods to play and make my mark. The endless hours in gyms. The search for perfection. The adrenaline rush, the thrill, the joy of the perfect pass, the sweet swish of the net from a shot you had practiced a thousand times. From the age of eleven until twenty-three, basketball was central to my life and identity. It was my passion.

It was during these recent days shooting around that I started to have almost nightly dreams of my younger years, playing basketball in high school and then in college on a Division I scholarship. They were very vivid dreams, and at the time, I didn’t understand why I was having them. And they were starting to annoy me, as persistent and weird dreams can do. Begone, dread spirits! Yet I knew they were telling me to heed their tales told when no one was looking, only this dreamer in the night.

While this was happening, I wrote an article about Bob Dylan and his recent release of “Murder Most Foul,” his powerful song about the assassination of President Kennedy, wherein he brilliantly accuses elements within the U.S. government and intelligence forces of killing the president in cold blood, while framing Lee Harvey Oswald for the deed. I had written about Dylan before, loved his music, and found him an intriguing if enigmatic character, a Houdini of song. “Murder Most Foul” seemed to burst out of Dylan after

decades of avoiding straight-forward political themes. It struck me that with this song he had ripped off the masks he had been wearing for decades, as if he were Odysseus at the end of *The Odyssey*, shrugging off his beggar's rags and announcing to the suitors of his wife Penelope that the gig was up and they were going down. It seemed to me that Dylan was coming full-circle, as if he were coming home to take revenge on the killers who had scarred his youth, as they did mine and so many others'. "Like a musician, like a harper, when/ with quiet hand upon his instrument," Odysseus lets the arrow sing, Dylan reaches back to sing:

The day they blew out the brains of the king
Thousands were watching, no one saw a thing
It happened so quickly, so quick, by surprise
Right there in front of everyone's eyes
Greatest magic trick ever under the sun
Perfectly executed, skillfully done

Slowly it dawned on me that everyone's life has a shape, as if it were a drawing or story or song. And that if we pay close attention and see through all the snares and temptations meant to divert us from our true paths, we will find our beginnings in our ends and without directions we will find our way home.

It is very hard to explain to someone who didn't know you once upon a time long before you met, how important certain activities were to you, what they meant and still mean in the deepest recesses of your psyche. How they shaped you, or better still, how you used them to bend your life when you strung your bow so effortlessly to hit the target that you aimed for. Or thought you were aiming for. My life in basketball shaped the man that I became, but my wife only knows the aftermath since she met me when I had taken a long twenty-five-year vacation from basketball. Like Cousy, sitting and talking with Pomeranz, or Dylan sharpening his arrows and letting them fly in his new song *False Prophet*, I could say:

You don't know me darlin' - you never would guess
I'm nothing like my ghostly appearance would suggest
I ain't no False Prophet - I just said what I said
I'm here to bring vengeance on somebody's head

While I am half-way through reading the Cousy book, I get its drift, where it's heading. In conversations with Pomeranz, he is hoping to be inspired to understand the journey that has left him, an old man, frightened, alone, and approaching death in a large house in Worcester, Massachusetts, trying to understand, not only his fraught relationship with his black Celtic teammate, Bill Russell, but what his life has been all about, the court wizardry and cheers, the years on the road, the applause and awards, the championships and the price they exacted. He went to the basketball wars and won, came home, but now wonders what home really means. Unlike Odysseus, he only has ghosts to slay. His wife is dead, and no suitors occupy the great house of shades. There is no one to kill except his regrets.

My friend, Wayne, who sent me the book, spent three years in high school with me studying Greek, and over the course of those years, we translated Homer's *The Odyssey* line by line. We were also basketball teammates. Odysseus, of course, was the ultimate trickster, the man of many wiles and disguises, what the nymph Calypso, who held Odysseus captive for seven years on her island Ogygia, called "a rascal." Like Houdini, Odysseus was able to

escape this phantom island with the help of the messenger and trickster Hermes. Like Cousy, Odysseus was the Houdini of the ancient world, the hero who could escape any trap and thread an arrow through the smallest space to defeat the enemy. Cousy's fierceness on the court is legendary; his poker face hid the killer instinct, like Odysseus with his wily habit of standing with downcast eyes to disguise his intent. Cousy could thread a pass between an opponent's eyes without them blinking. They often never knew what hit them.

I was reminded of this as I was rereading bits of Bob Dylan's fascinating and poetic memoir, *Chronicles: Volume I*, and came upon his memory of hearing the news of the death of "Pistol" Pete Maravich, the greatest scorer in college basketball history and a magician without par on the court. Maravich was Cousy's heir, and the blood line connects to Dylan also, a Houdini with words. It was January 5, 1988:

My aunt was in the kitchen and I sat down with her to talk and drink coffee. The radio was playing and morning news was on. I was startled to hear that Pete Maravich, the basketball player, had collapsed on a basketball court in Pasadena, just fell over and never got up. I'd seen Maravich play in New Orleans once, when the Utah Jazz were the New Orleans Jazz. He was something to see - mop of brown hair, floppy socks - the holy terror of the basketball world - high flyin' - magician of the court. The night I saw him he dribbled the ball with his head, scored a behind the back, no look basket - dribbled the length of the court, threw the ball up off the glass and caught his own pass. He was fantastic. Scored something like thirty-eight points. He could have played blind. Pistol Pete hadn't played professionally for a while, and he was thought of as forgotten. I hadn't forgotten about him, though. Some people seem to fade away but then when they are truly gone, it's like they didn't fade away at all.

He goes on to write that after hearing the news of Pistol Pete's sad death playing pickup basketball, he started and completed the song "Dignity" the same day, and in the days that followed song after song flowed from his pen. The news of one creative spirit's death gave birth to another creative spirit's gift to life. (I am reminded of Shakespeare writing Hamlet after his father's death.) "It's like I saw the song up in front of me and overtook it, like I saw all the characters in this song and elected to cast my fortunes with them The wind could never blow it out of my head. This song was a good thing to have. On a song like this, there's no end to things."

No one wants to end, to fade away. To not be recognized. To die and be forgotten. To fail to make their mark. Not Dylan, Cousy, Maravich, me, nor you. We all wish to become who we feel we were meant to be. To fulfill the creative dreams we had when young and not to waste our lives in trivial pursuits. Years pass and people often ask with Dylan in "Shooting Star":

Seen a shooting star tonight
And I thought of me
If I was still the same
If I ever became what you wanted me to be
Did I miss the mark or overstep the line
That only you could see?
Seen a shooting star tonight
And I thought of me

I keep thinking: who is you for you? For me?

When I was a young boy, I wanted to stand out, to be exceptional, to be one-of-a-kind, an individual. Basketball became my obsession and Bob Cousy my idol. I wanted to be a shooting star, a dribbling star, a passing star. I watched him on television, studying him. His every move inspired me to imitate it. I would spend hours every day practicing behind the back passes, first right-handed, then left, against the wall where I had marked an x in chalk. I worked on my peripheral vision, so I could see the whole court and control the show. In the hidden recesses of my basement, I used tape to mark spots on the floor where I spent hour after hour dribbling behind my back, first this way and then that, past imaginary opponents. I made dribbling glasses with black tape out of my mother's old sun glasses. Worked on circling the ball behind my back either way. Hour after hour, day after day, year after year, I devoted myself to perfecting my basketball skills as a point guard. Being like Bob Cousy. Being the one whose magic feats were the talk of the town the following day.

One day, I met and talked with Paul Newman on the street after high school basketball practice. When I was leaving, he called me Fast Eddie, which to my mind added to the mystique I felt as a trickster on the hardwood. I felt fast and loose like Paul's character Eddie Felson in *The Hustler* when he was on a roll with his cue stick, "You don't have to look, you just know. You make shots that nobody has ever made before. I can play that game the way.... Nobody's ever played it before." That was my goal and the impetus behind my fanatical devotion to practice. I loved it, there was joy in it, but there was also a driven quality to my quest.

For whom? Only you?

I was easily bored by conventional life and conventional basketball. But the conventional world surrounded me. It was in school, church, the way people talked and walked; it seemed like people were straight-jacketed, which they were. Blake's mind-forged manacles. I sensed people were dissemblers, and that lies were the essence of social life.

Nowhere was this truer than on the basketball court in high school and college where the coaches had their systems and their rules and discouraged innovation, as if it would reveal them to be artists in disguise, weird, less-than-manly men who couldn't run a tight ship. They always rewarded those who obeyed them and kept within the strict rules of the system. Creativity frightened them. The old ways sufficed. It was just like society, and though Cousy had broken through and been idolized for doing so, he had retired from the Celtics in the spring of 1963, while the high school and college programs were stuck in the past.

I felt imprisoned. I wanted to bust out and play free. Be free. It was like the classics that I studied in school: the lesson was always that the exploits you read about were things of the past, and now we were civilized gentlemen who must learn the rules of the game and play by them. Tradition. But the rules were suffocating me.

The rules of the game had almost brought the world to an end during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. The rules of the game had created a system of war and racism that was badly broken, resulting in the savage killing not only a President who had undergone a radical spiritual conversion toward peace-making, but four little black girls in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on Sunday September 15, 1963, the week I started college with my trivial young man's dreams of being the Cousy of college hoops. The rules

of the game would soon be violated by Dylan at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival, when he would shock Pete Seeger and others with his song, "Mr. Tambourine Man," a radical break with strictly political songs in favor of pure dazzling poetry in song. That was a Cousy moment, poetry in motion, Houdini out of the locked box, dancing "beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free."

Bob Dylan, whose life and career follows Odysseus' trajectory, ended his 2017 Nobel Award Lecture with the first line of the Odyssey: "Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story." My friend Wayne and I, together with all our high school classmates, had memorized those lines in Greek. They were ingrained in us for life, as they have been for Dylan.

But tell what story? For whom? Only you?

Dylan has told so many. Here's one I have for you, one you never heard. Here are the opening lines; let's call it Book I, not that a Goddess intervened, but it was, in Odysseus' words, the beginning of the end of my "clean-cut game."

Shortly after President Kennedy was murdered in Dallas on November 22, 1963, I played my first college basketball game. In those days, all freshman were required by the rules of the game to play one year of freshman basketball before playing varsity. This was the day I had been waiting for since the sixth grade when my dedication to basketball began. My blood was flowing fast, I had no fear, and was ready to use all the skills I had spent years honing. The stands were packed. My proud family sat a few rows up behind our bench, my parents and four of my sisters, one of whom was eight and the other eleven.

The game was close, back and forth it went. With about a minute and a half left, we were leading by two points. The other coach called a time out with the ball in their possession. In the huddle, our coach assigned me to guard the opponent's best player, a six-foot-four inch jumping jack who was highly acclaimed and a very good player by the name of Albie Grant. I was five-foot-eleven, and beside my offensive skills, was a tough and tenacious very well-conditioned defender who took pride in sticking to an opponent like glue. They threw the ball in and screened for Grant. He got the ball and I got in his face. He went up for a jump shot from about 20 feet out, and since I was not going to block his shot, I did what all good defenders do, I got my hand in front of his eyes. But he made the shot anyway, and the referee called a shooting foul on me. But I never touched him. It was a terrible call, but I could do nothing about it.

Behind my back, I could hear my coach cursing me out with every name in the book - you fucking bastard, you shit, etc. He could be heard throughout the arena. The crowd went silent. He kept cursing me out and my already sweaty, red face must have turned purple. I felt on fire. He took me out of the game, a game I had played throughout. He kept cursing at me. I sat away from him on the bench and he came down and stood over me, calling me every name in his limited vocabulary, you fucking this, you fucking that. I looked at him in rage. The game continued. Grant made the free throw and we lost by one point. As we walked off the court to the locker room door at the end, he kept screaming invective at me. I could feel my rage swelling. My family was descending from the stands and could hear it all. I noticed others staring in disbelief. To say it was humiliating barely captures what it felt like, but just as I played the game fiercely, I was not one to take such abuse. But I kept telling myself to control myself. It was the coach who was making a fool of himself. Then, when we entered the locker room, he let loose at me again, you fucking idiot, you fucking bastard....when I snapped and grabbed him by his shirt and tie, my hands around his neck, I

threw him up against the wall and let him have it, screaming that I'd had enough of his shit and I would kill him if he ever did it again. All hell broke loose as people were pulling me off him, and my father, who was outside the locker room, came rushing in to intervene.

Years of passionate dedication to becoming the best basketball player I could, came to this. I had reacted in fury to being humiliated "in my own house" in front of my family. I think now of Odysseus when he stood on the broad door sill and killed Antínoös, the worst of the suitors of his wife, Penelope. "Odysseus' arrow hit him under the chin/ and punched up to the feathers through his throat." How dare he take revenge and defend his honor, came the shouts from the easily offended but secretly guilty. The other suitors screamed at him: "Foul! To shoot at a man! That was your last shot."

It wasn't mine, but that is the rest of the story. My craft changed in the following years. I no longer tried to imitate other tricksters like Bob Cousy or Bob Dylan. They have their own tales to tell and dwell upon. Their words are not mine.

Now I play with words in my own way.

But like Bob Dylan, "I return once again to Homer who says, 'Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story.'

Our stories often happen behind our backs where we can't see them. Telling them is the trick. You need to turn around and see what's behind you to pass them around.

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*Distinguished author and sociologist **Edward Curtin** is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization. Visit the author's website [here](#).*

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