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Reprinted from the February 14, 2018, issue of U.S. 1 Newspaper

A Sense of Where You Are
by Pia de Jong

When I walk into the radio studio on the 36th floor of an apartment building in Manhattan for an interview, I suddenly arrive in the middle of a rehearsing hip-hop band. The boys turn and spin on their bright red sneakers, their teeth sparkling with gold. The girls are dressed like they are heading for a nightclub in their stiletto heels and glittering nails. And who else but the radio broadcaster Howard Stern is there warming up for a show?


Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

Standing calmly in the middle of this Breugelian scene is my unlikely host, a tallish older man in a knitted V-neck sweater and decent, laced-up shoes. A throwback from another time. He is Bill Bradley, the 74-year-old former Princeton basketball player, Rhodes Scholar, pro basketball player, U.S. Senator from New Jersey, and onetime presidential candidate. He shakes my hand, slightly shyly, with one eyebrow arched.

Bradley is a newcomer to my Dutch eyes, but in the U.S. he was something close to the beau ideal of an exemplary American boy. He worked hard and excelled at everything he did — from sports to politics. At Princeton University he remains a legend. Dangling from the rafters of Jadwin Gym is the banner for his Sullivan Award as the nation's best amateur athlete. In front of the gym is a bronze statue capturing him in mid-dribble, done by his college friend, the sculptor Harry Weber.

In high school Bradley received offers from dozens of universities. After some deliberation — he always deliberates — Bradley chose Princeton. As captain of the U.S. Olympic basketball team in Tokyo, he won a gold medal against the Soviet Union. He took Princeton to the Final Four in the NCAA basketball tournament. For 10 years he played with the New York Knicks and won two NBA titles. He served three terms as a New Jersey Senator.

All of his life people had been asking if he would someday run for president, and he finally did it. He entered the presidential race in 2000. To the dismay of many, he lost in the primaries to Al Gore. "I wish Bill were in the White House now," sighs my neighbor, who remembers Bradley from his high school days in Missouri. In his garage there is still a sign that says Bill Bradley for President.

When Bradley was still a Princeton student, he was profiled by John McPhee for *The New Yorker*. It would become McPhee's first book, "A Sense of Where You Are." The title came from the time when Bradley was talking to McPhee and casually tossed a basketball into the net behind him without looking. Astounded, McPhee asked, How did you do that? "When you have played basketball for a while, you don't need to look at the basket when you are in close like this," Bradley explained. "You develop a sense of where you are."

That became his credo. Have a sense of where you are in life. Don't get carried away. Understand your environment, the context in which you're living, and make your decisions based upon your centeredness.

As a result, Bradley is a good listener. These days he hosts a weekly interview program called American Voices on Sirius/XM radio. "When I was a senator, I was most touched by the life stories people told me," he says. "Now I want everyone to share their stories. Political preference, money, fame does not matter. It is about what moves people."

Bradley, with his values — humility, honesty, unselfishness, and decency — is a dinosaur in these Trumpian times. His talent was that he knew exactly where he was standing on the basketball court — and in life. But in his time everyone agreed on where the net was, what the rules of the game were, and what success was. Today anyone can decide the rules themselves, throw the ball anywhere, and give themselves a prize.

We all need a sense of where we are.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her memoir, "Saving Charlotte: A Mother and the Power of Intuition," was published in 2017 by W.W. Norton. She is filling in for Richard K. Rein, who has been on assignment.

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