A day came when we realized that something was going to have to give, as they say. We weren't going to be able to stay in our beloved house for what might be a long time ahead unless we were going to end up depending on and beholden to our children. After months of searching and visiting, we landed in Morganton, a lovely small town in the foothills.

We tacitly decided to ignore unstated questions about race relations in a kind of ostrich mindset. We bought a house on an unpretentious but pleasant street in an old part of town, and my husband began some renovations. In the parking lot of Lowe's, we observed two young men, one black and one white, approaching each other. With sudden whoops of happy recognition, they met and embraced and were still talking with considerable animation when we left our car to go into the store.

"We wouldn't see that in Connecticut," my husband remarked.

We weren't so ignorant that we didn't realize that we had dropped into what might be an atypical Southern town, and thought we were fortunate, but wherever we've been, from Wilmington to Asheville with many a stop in between, we've seen that we're happy to have arrived in the New South.

Before our move, still in southern New England, we heard a conversation between the marketing person for the retirement community where we live and a daughter of prospects. It took place in a moderately upscale condominium community for those over fifty-five. The young woman said she couldn't wait to move down to Morganton because she had visited there, and in a restaurant had observed a child answering an adult with, "Yes, ma'am," and she couldn't wait to get to a neighborhood with manners like that.

Our first visits to retail establishments gave us as great a culture shock as anything else has. Clerks actually approach a customer and ask if they can help. If you come from a northeastern city, you can scarcely believe your ears. The attitude of strangers took some getting used to. I walked the dog in our quiet neighborhood and was greeted from passing pickup trucks as well as by other pedestrians as if the people knew me. In the local wellness center, my husband was asked how he was doing as he climbed the stairs to the gym.

We're not so naïve as to assume this civility is profoundly heartfelt, but it nevertheless is so courteous as to make us and everyone else want to react in kind. And that perhaps is what is most special about North Carolina. It seems to occupy an enviable place where homage to tradition and pride of place manage to exist in balance with habitual politeness, modern political sensibilities, and a heartening number of open minds.

Our families have heritages of which we're proud too, so we understand what we find here. We've been humbled by the well-documented failures of our educations as we've attended Historical Society meetings and lectures at the Burke County Public Library on the Revolutionary War. We didn't realize how much of that conflict was actually won here. We're touched by the willingness of the "locals" to accept these Yankees and treat us as though we might be able to learn how to fit in. Thank you, North Carolina, for your gentle sons and daughters and your mountains and piedmont and sandhills and barrier islands, your arts and crafts, and especially, your literature.