

## Making a Place for Yourself

**“Staying comfortable is largely a matter of culture. Informal or core culture is the foundation on which interpersonal relations rest. All of the little things that people take for granted . . . depend on sharing informal patterns.”**

—EDWARD HALL

### THE ART OF CROSSING CULTURES

The rules governing small-town behavior are no more Byzantine or benighted than those of city life or corporate culture. Though small-townners often get a bad rap for rigidity and intolerance, city critics let themselves off the hook when they move to a town and expect their behavior, their individuality, to be accepted—no matter how eccentric, alien or off-putting—without extending the courtesy of understanding the culture of the small town and putting forth an effort to adapt to it.

In order to make a successful adjustment to a small town and carve out a place for yourself, you, the newcomer, must first recognize that each town (no matter what its size) has its own unique identity and culture that should be respected as that of a foreign land.

This chapter tackles that most difficult and delicate challenge that awaits you in moving to a small town—making a place for yourself in this “foreign land.” It is a task that will prove essential to the outcome of your move.

Once you move, you'll want to hit the ground running. Your early days, weeks and months are crucial to your eventual adjustment, acceptance and success in a small town, unlike in the city, where you can take your time getting your bearings and tailoring your urban persona. In a small town, you're making your debut from day one, and this "coming out" will continue for months, if not a year or two. People will be sizing you up as a new community member, businessperson, churchgoer and potential friend. Everything from your dress and demeanor to your attitude and speech patterns will be carefully weighed.

Succeeding at this stage will help you determine whether your dream of a new life in a small town will take root and flourish or wither and die. After scouting your new location, transplanting your family and career and settling into your new home, you've already invested heavily in your plan and have a lot at stake. So why falter at this final stage?

"I've heard some folks who've moved here say, 'Obviously you have to be born here to make it.' But that's not at all true," says Tanya B. Rees, executive director of the Surry Arts Council in Mount Airy, North Carolina. "People are respected for coming in and doing their own thing. What's important is their level of sincerity. The folks who've been successful have simply been true to themselves."

Folks who are successful need not only be true to themselves but to behave in a culturally sensitive manner. Newcomers need to take in the new culture, oftentimes putting their individuality on the back burner and letting it emerge gradually. You needn't clobber people over the head with your identity or try too hard to impress them right off the bat. Try to relax, although that can be challenging because it is precisely when they are in flux that many people most need to assert their personalities.

Indeed, intercultural consultants to Fortune 500 companies assert that "cross-cultural adjustment" poses the greatest stumbling block for Americans when trying to make successful transitions overseas. More than one-third of Americans who move abroad for jobs or study return home "prematurely," writes Craig Storti,

author of *The Art of Crossing Cultures*. “[M]any, perhaps, most . . . genuinely want to adapt to the local culture.” The majority, he says, do not.

Why such a high rate of failure?

The author holds “cultural blindness” responsible. “True cultural adjustment and effective cross-cultural interaction are more elusive than we might imagine.”

Since Americans share a common language and national (political and media) culture, we tend to minimize the difficulties of cross-cultural adaptation *within* our own country. But differences of customs, attitude and pace of life between regions of the country are compounded by *even greater* differences between the generic cultures of major metropolitan areas and small-town America. (Although tens of thousands of towns in the United States exist and no two cultures are identical, there’s enough in common among small towns to establish cultural characteristics that accompany small-sized communities, particularly those that are primarily self-sustaining, not mere bedroom communities of major metropolitan areas.)

### *Cracking the Small-Town Code*

This chapter will give you the lowdown on making the adjustment—and ultimately the commitment—to the culture of your small town. But don’t expect to take to small-town culture like a duck to water; and don’t expect adaptation to happen overnight. It takes time to advance through the typical and predictable stages of adjustment. These stages range from what Gretchen Janssen, author of *Women on the Move: A Christian Perspective on Cross-Cultural Adjustment*, describes as the “fascination-honeymoon” phase; the “subtle-irritations” phase; the “frustration-culture shock” phase; the “coping” phase; to the final “adaptation” phase. As you overcome these internal hurdles, you’ll also be making more tangible progress: cracking the small-town code, building a network of relationships and a bedrock of trust and convincing people you’re no fly-by-nighter—that you really are digging in your heels and staying.

"You really have to work at it, make it a real project," says Mary Lou Rich Goertzen, who in 1975 moved from Berkeley, California, to Deadwood, Oregon (population 150), with her husband, three teenagers and a foster child.

Although the length of time it takes to feel accepted in a rural community or small town depends on the size of the town and the degree of transience among its residents, Goertzen estimates that it took her ten years to establish her legitimacy as a player and a stayer. "We've been here for twenty years," says Goertzen, sixty-five. "I've become more like a country person (than a city person)."

Likewise, Kathleen Norris, the poet and essayist who in 1974 moved with her husband from New York City to her mother's hometown of Lemmon, South Dakota (population 1,871), fixed the date of passage from being a newcomer to a long-hauler at ten years. However, in larger towns with a higher degree of transience, this number is likely to be lower—perhaps as low as three to five years.

We've found the number of times that locals inquire about whether we're really here for good has diminished with each passing year. After ten years of residence, the questions have changed from: "Will you stay?" to "Do you ever miss L.A.?"

### *A Period of Personal Growth*

If you're willing to make a commitment to change, to stretch your known capabilities and strive to uncover new ones, your early years in your new town will be exciting. The move to a small town can kick-start a period of tremendous personal growth—one in which you forge bonds with members of your new community and discover new strengths and skills within yourself.

"I thought I knew who I was when I came, but, once here, I learned much more about myself," says Norris of her adjustment to Lemmon. "I found out what I could and couldn't do in various situations." One of the things she found she *could* do is to write deeply felt essays about a carefully observed life in her corner of

the world—a book that after an initial printing of 2,500 in hard-cover became a surprise bestseller. The town of Lemmon served as a kind of cocoon, enabling Norris's "voice" to emerge. Whether or not you're a writer, your small town can serve the same purpose for you, providing roots to anchor you and wings to let your spirit fly.

What's at the end of the road (or at the corner of Main and Maple streets) may be your first genuine community, the first time in your life you've actually had a hometown to call your own. This chapter will lay out effective modes of small-town behavior and show you how to observe this often conservative code while still being true to yourself. It is about learning how to win in a small town. And while not everyone who moves to (or lives in) a small town subscribes to the following prescription for success, those who do invariably come out on top.

#### SIXTEEN SKILLS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

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**I**n his book, *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*, L. Robert Kohls writes that there are "certain skills or traits which you may have—or, with a little effort, develop—that will facilitate your rapid adjustment" into a new culture. These include the following:

- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Low goal/task orientation
- Open-mindedness
- Nonjudgmentalness
- Empathy
- Communicativeness

- Flexibility; adaptability
  - Curiosity
  - Sense of humor
  - Warmth in human relationships
  - Motivation
  - Self-reliance
  - Strong sense of self
  - Tolerance for differences
  - Perceptiveness
  - Ability to fail
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## LETTING GO OF THE CITY

No matter how much you disliked the city or how eager you were to decamp and start life anew in a small town, the city was nevertheless your home for however many months or years. Now that you've arrived in your small town, you'll need to unhook the old connection.

### *"City Fixes"*

The best way to begin your psychic withdrawal from the city is to go at it gently. Give yourself some time to pull out, while reminding yourself that you *can* go back periodically for "city fixes." Because change is gradual, taking two steps forward (advancing into small-town life) and one step back (maintaining ties with old friends and keeping up with city news) is healthy. So is planning

excursions to the city to shop for presents and stock your cupboard with exotic food items and delicacies or taking in art galleries, opera and symphony music, French pastry and Vietnamese cuisine. If urban energy beckons, you may want to revisit a city periodically just to feed on the intensity of a cultural polyglot, to keep your city juices flowing.

When Monica Hinton first moved to Cullowhee, North Carolina (population 4,029), from Chicago, she used to drop down to Atlanta every several months just to “ride public transportation,” she says. And she treasured her trips to New Orleans where she could walk on the sidewalks at 2 A.M. But once she made the adjustment to the slower pace and the commitment to her new life, such urban urges began to dissipate and today have all but vanished. “Now I’d *pay* someone to go [to the city] in my place,” says Hinton.

When Kathleen Norris and her husband first arrived in Lemmon and were struck by cabin fever, they’d likewise hit the road. “We’d get the Bismarck paper and read about a first-run movie and drive 125 miles to see it. Gas was cheaper then,” she explains. “We’d have a meal out, spend the night in a motel, do some shopping and come home. It was our big expedition.” Though Bismarck, North Dakota (population 44,485), is a far cry from Manhattan, it did provide them with the feel of a *larger* town.

### *“Marooned on a Desert Island”*

In part because Norris was familiar with Lemmon from spending many of her childhood summers there, the transition for her was neither shocking nor especially difficult. Discovering that some commodities they used regularly (like olive oil) weren’t readily available nettled them at first. “Sometimes it was hard,” says Norris, “but more often, it felt like an adventure, like being marooned on a desert island.” She learned she could have her small-town cake and eat olive oil, too, by bundling her city errands and buying such items in bulk.

Developing new, unlikely skills helped to ease the transition as well. “I learned I liked to do a lot of things that I didn’t have the

time—or the inclination—for in the city. Like how to bake bread, can vegetables and make chokecherry jelly, jam and syrup,” Norris says.

For others—because perhaps they moved to a small town under protest or as a trailing spouse—letting go of the big city proved more difficult. When Marie Garabed moved to Cumberland Center, Maine (population 2,015), from Detroit in 1969, she was appalled by the “vanilla-ice-cream, white-bread” mentality she found. “It was culturally a shock, the fact that no one understood what was going on outside [lily-white Maine],” says the native of Teaneck, New Jersey. She and her family had left Detroit in the midst of the civil-rights unrest and found residents of coastal Maine seemingly oblivious and their politicians completely out of touch. “I’d just come from the riots of Detroit and [Senator Edmund S.] Muskie was talking about how he understood busing because 95 percent of the kids in Maine were bused. And I thought to myself: ‘That’s kind of different.’”

Although Garabed’s initial adjustment to the community was troublesome, after twenty-six years in the Pine Tree State, she’s found a place for her multicultural point of view as a staffer at the Intercultural Press in Yarmouth. If she were to make the move all over again, she says she’d handle it differently. Instead of grouching about the provincialism of Mainers, Garabed says she’d be “more realistic” and more proactive. “I’d try to find a way to work around and through the parts that weren’t okay,” she says. “You can meet a need that might be unfulfilled in a small town.” She cites the work she does on refugee resettlement as an example. Had she signed on for such work when she first arrived, it might have enabled her to make her peace with the place more quickly.

### *Don't Expect Too Much Too Quickly*

As you’re making the transition to small-town life, it’s a good idea to pat yourself on the back, to congratulate yourself on your small steps and private victories. Recognize the first time you reach for the *Comstock Daily Bugle* instead of the *Cleveland Plain*



*Dealer.* Be proud when you are able to tell out-of-towners for whom your town was named and convincingly answer their follow-up questions. And you can outright celebrate the first time you tell a native a fact about her town that she didn't know.

Once you begin to make a successful adjustment to a small town—once you're integrated into the rhythms of community life and find a contribution you can make—you'll discover that your appetite for city fixes diminishes. And when you've established your presence in a small town—watch out!—your city friends will troop in by the dozens to get their vicarious taste of small-town life.

### *The Learning Curve*

The minute you set foot in town, you've embarked on a major learning curve. You're taking in new people, scenery and sensations; new shops, customs and rhythms. Listen to the music of the place, the way people talk, the expressions they use, the cadences of their speech. Listen to their stories for what they reveal about themselves and the local culture. Whether you're oriented toward pen and ink or computer screen, start a journal of random musings about your new life, jotting down the things you hear (and overhear) that intrigue you, along with your own perceptions. Dig up the notes you took when scouting a new location and review them. The best way to get yourself acclimated to your new hometown is by gaining some depth of knowledge.

"Start by learning the history of the town," suggests Ken Munsell, of the Small Town Institute. "Make connections with the people who were there before. You need to get a feel for the economy, geography, land, what kinds of plants there are. Eventually, they interrelate. Pick up that information so you can feel a sense of connectedness early on."

Realize going in that learning a small town takes time and effort. You can begin to understand the town and the area by reading books and historical accounts; that way, you'll get a feel for the passions and proclivities of the people. However, refrain from touting your knowledge.

“Reading helps,” says Kathleen Norris, “but if you start regurgitating everything you’ve read, you’ll scare people off. It’s a delicate balance.”

## PRINCIPLES OF SMALL-TOWN LIVING

### *People-Centered World*

The first thing you need to understand about small-town life is that it’s people-centered—far more so than any city. In a small town, people come first; this is both the greatest strength and the greatest limitation of small-town living.

You may reason that since there are more people per square mile in Manhattan than in Manhattan, Kansas, the former would be more people-oriented than the latter. Not so. In big cities, the sheer mass of humanity depersonalizes human beings, allowing for easier polarization, class categorization and stereotyping by race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Although the demographic composition of a city may demonstrate far greater ethnic and racial diversity than a given town, the actual *experience* of small-town living is likely to thrust you into regular and personal contact with a far greater range of people of differing age groups, economic categories and educational levels.

Because people who live in big cities tend to know others by industry or occupation, their interpersonal dealings are likely to be more stratified. In fact, you could make the case that prejudice of any form takes root more easily in a large city, where people are judged by externals, such as their skin color, ethnicity, gender, age and income. In a small town, you’re more likely to know the individual or know of him or her, so these superficial factors become far less relevant. (See box, “Are Small Towns Right for Minorities and People of Color?”)

If you’re Lutheran, for instance, in some small towns there’s likely to be only one church of that denomination. That’s where congregants would mingle, whether they’re factory workers or factory owners. The same holds true for public schools. In rural America, assert Marilyn and Tom Ross in their book, *Country*

*Bound!*, people are “measured not so much by the size of their wallets, what they wear, or what work they do, but rather by their personal qualities, such as promptness, honesty and resourcefulness.”

The meaning of the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life* comes into full focus only after you've lived in a small town long enough to perceive the way in which friendship and relationships—“human capital”—can be even more valuable than money in the bank. Likewise, the film underscores the inordinate importance of one single caring and dynamic person in a small town. When the George character (played by Jimmy Stewart) comes back to Bedford Falls and sees how diminished life would be there had he never lived and built up a reservoir of good deeds, he learns from his friend Clarence, the angel, the ultimate wisdom that speaks volumes: “Remember, no man is a failure who has friends.”

And, in small towns, these friendships overshadow all else. For instance, although small-towners tend to be more conservative politically and personally than residents of big cities, because people and friendships come first, their politics are often “compromised” by the code of intense loyalty to fellow residents or “members of the family.” Even those with seemingly radical political ideas can be accepted and respected in their own hometowns. (“We bend the rules; that's part of small-town charm,” writes Kathleen Norris in *Dakota*.) Norris points to an old “bohemian radical” in Lemmon, who used to work for a Communist bookstore in California in the 1930s who's now “one of the local characters, an irreplaceable old coot whom we love and hate.”

After World War II, as early members of the United World Federalists, a group that advocated world government to prevent war, Frank's parents were hardly in step with the Republican majority in the small rural county in which we now live, nor with the conservative Democratic politics of nearby Mount Airy. Yet, they were constantly asked to address local churches, schools and civic clubs. And when Frank's mom, Miriam Lindsey Levering, died in 1991, a well-known Republican pronounced with per-

sonal anguish that “a great oak has fallen.” What’s more, the two senior Leverings were able to help establish a strong local chapter of a related organization, the American Freedom Association, which sponsors an annual trip to the United Nations and a speech contest for high school students promoting their ideas. Townsfolk of every political stripe have been only too eager for their children to participate.

### *Our Town: The Center of the Universe*

It may be hard to fathom but it’s true. Every small town is a world unto itself and the “true believers”—that is, the ones whose commitment to the community is absolute—are convinced that their town is the center of the universe. You can see this bias reflected in the column inches of newspaper stories, in which local news invariably overshadows state and national stories. The lead story may be: Fire Department Buys New Truck, with another, much shorter, story below the fold about less consequential matters such as a new trade agreement out of Washington or who’s ahead in the presidential race. You’ll see this personal bias everywhere and hear it in conversations at the drugstore, at the malls and at the town hall.

This is no case of soft brains or collective myopia. Rather it’s a natural characteristic of every distinct human culture. “Every group of people, every culture, is, and has always been, ethnocentric,” writes L. Robert Kohls in *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*. “[T]hat is, it thinks its own solutions are superior and would be recognized as superior by any right-thinking, intelligent, logical human being. It is significant that to each group, their own view of the world appears to be the ‘common-sense’ or ‘natural’ view.”

Because ex-urbanites have deliberately chosen an off-the-beaten-track locale, this center-of-the-universe perspective can be especially difficult for many to swallow. And while it’s certainly not a feeling that you can will yourself to internalize, it’s important to recognize. Indeed, the famed *New Yorker* cover that shows the distorted perspective of Manhattan compared to the rest of America applies metaphorically to every small town in America. The smaller a

community is (and the less likely it would *appear* to be the center of the universe), the more fiercely residents cling to this belief.

*Community Service: You Can't Say No*

In the city the attitude is, what's in it for me? In the small town, the attitude is, what's in it for my community? This may seem somewhat oversimplified, but there's an enormous amount of truth behind the statement. In the small town, about the highest compliment that can be paid to an individual is that he or she is "community minded." It means that that person puts community first. This isn't hokum; it's serious business.

Whereas community service is strictly voluntary in a big city, in the small town, it's gospel. A small town is like a family. Every member is supposed to contribute to the well-being of the whole, and community service is the way to go about it. Because of the anonymity in the big city, no one knows whether you're a good citizen, an indifferent one, or even a scoundrel, whereas in a small town, everyone knows who gives money, time and in-kind gifts to fund drives, benefits and volunteer organizations. They also know who shows up for blood drives and litter pickup and to bag groceries for the needy at Christmas.

"In Newport Beach, I was never solicited *one time* in fifteen years for charity," says Frank Crail, founder and CEO of the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory in Durango, Colorado, who in 1981 moved there from Southern California where he had a small but successful computer consulting business. "A two- or three-million-dollar business in Southern California was nothing," he says. "Now Exxon in L.A. was hit all the time. But the small ones, no one expected it. I didn't realize those needs were there, frankly."

If you're talented, wealthy or possess unique skills (as most newcomers discover they do), understand that the community will take note of it and expect you to contribute to the communal cause. The more accomplished you are, the more you will be asked to do, borrowing from the old adage, from those to whom much is given, much is expected. If in the city, you were used to having to fend off suitors for your time and purse, changing your

automatic response from a no to a yes may involve a fundamental shift in your thinking. But giving time or money to community is a lovely way of being drawn into the community circle.

## TWELVE AXIOMS OF COMMUNITY

From *The Search for Meaning* by Thomas H. Naylor,

William H. Willimon and Magdalena R. Naylor

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1. If you don't know where you are going, no road will get you there.
  2. If you fear separation, meaninglessness and death, then unite.
  3. The price of community is your own individualism.
  4. There is no daddy and mommy, but if there were a daddy or mommy, he or she would be you.
  5. Share power—one person, one vote.
  6. Might doesn't make right.
  7. There's no substitute for commitment and hard work.
  8. Small is beautiful.
  9. Keep it simple—always make molehills out of mountains.
  10. Cooperate and communicate, if you want to survive.
  11. Reduce tension; don't escalate conflict.
  12. Grow spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally or die.
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## HOW TO BEHAVE

“Don’t complain and don’t explain.”

—SMALL-TOWN MAXIM

A strong code of etiquette exists that will help guide you toward making (and maintaining) a happy adjustment in your new town. To retrofit your city mind-set and persona, you’ll want to start on the inside—with your attitude. Adopting a mental posture of openness and expectancy will lead to discoveries large and small and will put you in the right frame of mind to build goodwill around town.

If you approach townspeople with the idea that they’re unique treasures, you’re likely to find individuals who will dazzle you, often in their small-town cover of plain brown wrap. You may encounter accomplished individuals who don’t advertise their credentials. Don’t be surprised to find a Ph.D. in molecular biology operating a dry-cleaning shop, a former performance artist from SoHo selling everlasting flower arrangements on Main Street or sharp-as-a-tack local businesspeople whose lack of a formal education has never detracted from their thriving enterprises.

While it’s impossible to compile an irreproachable list of do’s and don’t’s for small-town behavior, we will generalize about certain modes of behavior that are sure to please—or displease.

### ATTITUDE

Probably the most common mistake newcomers to small towns make is in assuming that the community and its institutions are backward and that you, having come from the cutting edge of culture and life, naturally know better, have experienced better or simply deserve better. Even those of you who sought out small-town life may subconsciously harbor the feeling that you’re stepping down or stepping backward. (Behavioral missteps are often made when one is trying to overcompensate for the feeling that moving to a small town means conceding some sort of defeat.)

This feeling is not surprising, given the deep-running societal prejudice—promulgated by big-city media—that cities are somehow superior to towns, that small towns are bastions of backwardness. (Witness a recent *New York Times* editorial, which begins with this inflammatory line: “Small-town cronyism is passable in small towns but dangerous when transplanted to Washington.” Such condescending assumptions lurk behind much of the generic press about small towns, as if cronyism doesn’t get by in Washington, D.C., New York City—or even, dare we mention it?—in the sacred halls of *The New York Times*.)

Nothing rankles the small-towner more than being prejudged by uppity city folks. The view that big cities are superior to small towns is not only erroneous but downright offensive. To try to erase this view, check yourself any time such a thought crosses your mind and censor yourself if you begin to speak it.

“Small-town people are so used to being exploited, misunderstood and stereotyped that any willingness to not do that will be appreciated and rewarded,” says Kathleen Norris.

“I just really feel that you have to bend over backward so people don’t think you think you’re better than they are,” says Mike Goldwasser, an Illinois native and one-time law student at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, who started a cattle farm in rural Carroll County, Virginia, in 1973. Goldwasser developed his community-sensitive philosophy in part after working as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching math and physics in Tanzania and Uganda in the late 1960s, where he was one of only a handful of Caucasians. He learned that “whenever you’re from outside the community—if you’re more educated or more white—you have to display more sensitivity, to bend over backward to not only *not* offend but to let people know you respect their way of life. There’s going to be an assumption by people that you don’t respect their way of life,” he says, “so even if you *do* respect it, the burden is on you to demonstrate your respect.”

Goldwasser, who served as a cross-cultural trainer for Peace Corps volunteers, applied this thinking to the mountain culture of Appalachia when he and his then fiancée moved to rural



southwest Virginia. Although a fish out of water, he has remained in the area long enough to see his philosophy bear fruit. Respected and admired in the community for his thriving cattle enterprise, he serves on numerous local boards, was named Virginia Cattleman of the Year in 1989 and is one of one hundred representatives nationwide on the Cattlemen's Beef Board, an industry group for the promotion of and research on beef.

But he cautions any newcomers following in his footsteps: "You can only be sensitive to these things if you really believe in them."

### *Don't Prejudge*

Never come into a new community with preconceived notions about the school system, medical care, the arts community or recreational facilities. Not only are you likely to be proven wrong, but you're liable to alienate the very people you should be befriending.

"There've been a number of folks who've come into Mount Airy assuming the schools are terrible because it's a small town, being highly critical when they haven't even bothered to learn the facts," says Tanya B. Rees of the Surry Arts Council. Affluent newcomers are the worst offenders, she says. Before giving local schools a chance, many check out the private schools in nearby Winston-Salem. "Everyone's child is gifted," remarks Rees wryly. "There's one couple who moved from New Jersey whose children had such fabulous backgrounds; they told me their children were so far superior to anything they'd likely encounter here. They wound up putting their children in our public schools. It turned out their children were of average intelligence."

Most former city residents are selectively guilty of this offense—ourselves included. Having met in a snooty, selective, creative-writing seminar at Harvard University, we didn't know what to expect when we team-taught our first class in creative writing at Surry Community College in Dobson, North Carolina. Some of our students had never been to college; others were high school English teachers with advanced degrees; some

were retirees wanting to chronicle their stories for their grandchildren; still others had compelling workplace tales to tell or pure yarns to spin but lacked the structural know-how. When the class finished, the group continued meeting on its own for several months. One of our students even sold a short story and an essay to two different national magazines. It inspired us to see her pure, over-the-transom talent prevail!

This experience and other similar ones taught us that *you can never prejudge the caliber of small-townners*. Check your diplomas, credentials, city-won accomplishments, and status at the town limits. Once you open yourself to discovering a small town, you'll be pleasantly surprised with what you see, feel and learn and, most of all, who you meet.

### *Don't Say You Know How Things Should Be Done*

Prejudging often takes the form of assuming that you're doing small-townners a favor by bestowing your professional expertise or business acumen on them. Make this breach at your own peril.

Restaurateurs Jim and Fran Van Zandt, who moved to Santa Rosa Beach in the Florida panhandle from New York City in 1989 to start what is now the highly successful Santa Rosa Beach Cafe and Bakery, have watched other newcomers follow them—and fall flat on their faces for precisely this reason.

Not long ago, a pair came down from Atlanta to this small resort town about sixty miles east of Pensacola to establish a tablecloth restaurant serving entrees ranging in price from \$18 to \$25. "They went around town saying, 'No one here knows anything about food,'" Jim Van Zandt remembers. "'We'll show you what it's like.' They lasted one season. They got zero support from the locals."

"If you don't get local support, you're dead," adds Fran Van Zandt. Word of mouth is critically important in a small community. "It's easy for people to say, 'bad attitude'" and write you off entirely, she says. Indeed, the Van Zandts' cafe, which has become the local equivalent of the *Cheers* bar and watering hole, now employs forty-eight locals. "On our shirts, we say, 'Friendliest place in town,'" says Fran Van Zandt. "We tell our staff, 'If

you don't like a customer, be friendly anyway. They're gone in half an hour.' But you'll be glad they come back."

Jim Van Zandt says the attitude in Santa Rosa Beach toward know-it-all outsiders is best summed up by "a standard bumper sticker that says: 'We Don't *Care* How You Did It Up North.'"

What's more, says Van Zandt, people have "no curiosity" about his Manhattan years. "When you mention something about New York, it's surprising how many people who live here say, 'Too bad you had to live there.'" End of discussion. If Van Zandt were to give a single piece of advice to city people moving to a small town, it's this: "I'd be real low-key. Don't tell them how important you were. Nobody cares."

### *Don't Expect Amenities from Your City to Be Found in Town*

Don't judge a small town's amenities by big-city standards, or gripe when you can't find cured Italian ham on Main Street, the way you were used to getting it elsewhere. "Don't try to bring New York City to Altoona," says Floyd Nelson, associate director of International Program Coordination for Habitat for Humanity in Americus, Georgia, who moved from Atlanta. "Accept it for what it is. Just as when you're at an Italian restaurant, you don't complain that there are no tacos."

Wanda was dumbfounded when she met a newcomer to Mount Airy one day at a Rotary lunch who, when asked how he liked it, complained that shopping here left something to be desired. He couldn't find any Gucci loafers or gourmet wines in town, he griped. Even though she's not a shopkeeper in town and is a relative newcomer herself, she could feel her defensive hackles going up.

### *Don't Be a "Cultural Monitor"*

Just as you should never go around town strutting your stuff, be equally careful about criticizing—or even verbally sizing up—the local culture. If you feel compelled to remark upon your new hometown (especially if your comments are in any way critical), call and unload on your out-of-town friends.

A letter written by Pam Parrish of Advance, North Carolina, published January 18, 1995, in the *Winston-Salem Journal*, expresses the silent agony of hometowners when obstreperous newcomers make sport of an indigenous culture. "Recently my family and I attended a party [where] I overheard a conversation among several people who have recently moved to our area from points north," Parrish writes. "The conversation began with a discussion of the lack of multi-culturalism in North Carolina. As the conversation began to degrade into a North Carolina-bashing session, I left the room. Being reared a well-mannered Southern lady, I did not say anything. However, I feel the need to say something now.

"For our recent additions from the North, I have a few questions. How would you like it if I moved to your home state and took about a million of my best buddies with me; then, while living and working in your state and taking advantage of all it has to offer, begin making comments that characterized all Northerners as loud-mouthed, pushy, crass and with the table manners of barnyard animals?

"I . . . have been called a racist, a bigot and a red-necked hick. In my own home state, I am treated as if I lack something in the intelligence department because I speak with a Southern accent. To top it off, I am automatically closed-minded, intolerant and homophobic because my religion is Baptist. . . . Just who appointed you cultural monitors anyway? Why should we embrace your cultures or make any attempts to understand you when you turn up your noses at us and our culture and act as if we are so stupid that we can't even tell when we are being insulted?"

Realize that comments that might seem insightful, engaging or merely truthful to you may be easily misconstrued. If a native asks you what you think of Galesburg, do not take this as an opening to unload your woes, inmost doubts or postpartum moving blues. Understand that this kind of question is akin to a parent asking how you liked his or her child in a dance recital. This is not the time for gut-wrenching honesty. (You'd never say: "Well, it's obvious Jennifer will never make it to the American

Ballet Theater.”) When people ask you what you think, this is the time for specific, positive feedback. A good response might be something on this order: “I’m amazed and delighted at how clean and litter-free the streets are.” Or tell a story about someone in town who went out of his or her way to welcome you or perform an act of kindness.

### *Cultivate a Giving Attitude*

Though this may seem commonsensical, in fact, cultivating a giving attitude may be more of a stretch for you than you realize. In the city, most people develop thick skins and with them a wariness about being taken advantage of. This coping mechanism may well be a healthy adaptation to the often predatory jungle of city life. But in a small town, it’s healthy and wise to practice giving. Small-towners say that giving will come back to you in ways you can never anticipate.

By giving, we mean finding ways to give financially and of your time and of yourself for the greater good. By giving, we mean being able to rise above the win/lose of a specific encounter or exchange and take a broad, long-term view of the situation. We know of one urban expatriate who moved into a small town, established a small service business and developed a relationship with a local nonprofit agency in which its clients received a special discount. So concerned was the businessman about being taken advantage of that he began demanding freebies of the agency and made a point of giving discounted service for the price. In the end, he antagonized the very outfit that could have lent him greatest support. This is a classic case of penny wisdom and pound foolishness. His concern for the short-term bottom line jeopardized his long-term goodwill.

“Having a giving attitude in a small town is going to get you further than having a taking attitude,” observes one small-towner who’s seen a parade of city people move into her town (and quite a number move on down the road). “It will be noticed and will accrue to you in the long run. It’s not being hypocritical; it’s being wise.”

## WHAT YOU HEAR AND WHAT YOU SAY

“The wise man knows what he says; the foolish man says all he knows.”

—UNKNOWN

### *Be a Good Listener*

Emanating from your attitude are the words out of your mouth. The first rule of thumb for any newcomer is to *be a good listener*. Listening more than talking is essential in a small town—especially for the newcomer. There’s a whole slew of expressions for what we’re recommending you do in your first six months in town: hold your tongue, zip your lip, shut your mouth, *fermez la bouche*, seal your lips. (The abundance of expressions for what’s desired here may reflect the relative scarcity of the practice.)

If any single pearl of wisdom holds doubly true for newcomers, it’s this one, from Stephen R. Covey’s book *Daily Reflections for Highly Effective People*: highly effective newcomers need to relearn constantly “the anatomy lesson that we have two ears and one mouth, and we should use them accordingly,” he writes.

Although you don’t want to appear to be a stone-faced enigma when conversing with small-townners, you *do* want to practice verbal self-restraint. In conversation, you’ll want to divulge some information about yourself to show that you’re present, to reflect your personality and aspirations, but never, *ever*, talk beyond the point of audience interest. Think of listening as paying your dues.

### *Choose Your Battles*

When you have to fight, choose your battles. Whether it’s a church or any other organization, don’t jump into the fray when heated issues are being discussed, even if they are seemingly inconsequential things such as the style of lights hanging in the church sanctuary, or what colors to repaint the bathrooms, or which plumber to give the contract to or what day to hold the parade.

“I pick my fights and look at which things are really going to

matter,” says Kathleen Norris. “There’s so much divisive talk in general in America. If we’d all listen more, rather than feel the need to spout our views on everything, we’d be better off.”

### *Seek Input of Old Guard*

Sonia Black, the head of an arts guild in a small Kansas town, says she’s been appalled by the frequency with which newcomers—particularly those hired into leadership positions—come in and go on about how they’re going to shake up the town without first seeking the input of the old guard. One such outsider, originally from Des Moines, came in with grand plans for his new job as school-system recreational director. Although Black’s arts guild is responsible for arranging arts programming as well as bringing in visiting artists, the new man started telling Black and others what great, glorious plans he’d made for his new post: classes he’d start, special projects he’d undertake, artists he could deliver. His plans overlapped with much of what the guild already did. Instead of soliciting Black’s input about what holes needed to be filled, he came out with his own agenda.

“Before you go out telling people what you’re going to do, consider listening to what has already been done,” advises Black. “If something hasn’t been done, there may be a reason.” A related point: you need not only listen respectfully but tread delicately on others’ turf.

Sometimes newcomers make the mistake of moving in too quickly on positions of power and alienating the long-standing interests of the natives. Again, by coming in with their own agendas and by not taking into account the concerns and interest of the old guard, they may wind up alienated from their new communities.

Philip M. Burgess of the Center for the New West says that he’s noticed for many small towns, tourism and economic development are hot-button issues, with newcomers often leading the charge against further development. Burgess recently spoke at the governor’s conference on tourism at the University of Idaho in Moscow. During the question-and-answer period, a Sun Val-

ley area economic development director agreed that a new breed of outsiders is coming to town and getting elected to city council or the library board. Many of these newcomers are “a problem,” she said. “They often have different values and their own agenda. Sometimes they take over. Now we’re having a big fight in our community because we want to spend money to buy porta-toilets and picnic tables for hikers and mountain bikers. But the lone eagles who’ve gotten into powerful positions don’t want public money spent to encourage summer tourism, even though it’s a major source of income for many old-timers in our community.”

### *Don't Be the First Voice to Speak*

“I’d rather remain silent and be thought a fool than open my mouth and remove all doubt.”

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Marion McAdoo Goldwasser, who grew up outside Philadelphia and received her master’s degree in English and education from Stanford University, taught in the Carroll County, Virginia, schools for more than twenty years. There she learned to discard some of her urban verbal habits the hard way. She had to work on “not being the first voice to speak out at a meeting. In Carroll County, people are more reticent; they take time to mull things over.” However, their motives aren’t entirely Olympian, she says. People weigh their words carefully so as not to “burn bridges or have their words come back to haunt them.”

Indeed, we recommend a hearty diet of listening when you arrive in town, and if this evolves into a lifetime habit, so much the better. Remember that among those who are well established in a small town, the top achievers tend to be hearty practitioners of the big-ear, small-mouth approach.

### *Take Care in Choosing Words*

Not only do you need to be sparing in what you say, but you should be *careful* about the content of your remarks. You do this



because everyone's related (by blood, friendship or business) and everything's interrelated; you're liable to put your foot in your mouth if you utter a disparaging word about the car dealer with whom you just spoke (who turns out to be somebody's daughter, uncle, cousin or friend). Even if they happen not to know the person in question or the situation you're discussing, remember that your *attitude* will be gauged by small-towners. If you criticize someone from their town (or even someone from your old city), your listener may well leap to the conclusion that he or she will be next on your verbal chopping block. Remember that criticism tightens people up; praise loosens them. Although this holds universally true, with the long memories and extended "mulling" time in small towns, this truth rings even louder here.

If you have blabbermouth tendencies, hold this image in your mind before you go out and about or pick up the telephone: Imagine that you're on the stand in a court of law and every word you utter is being taken into court record. This *can* be the case with small-towners when drawing their first impressions of newcomers from the city.

### *Avoid Directness of Speech*

In a small town, you should avoid directness of speech. Never tell someone: "Get to the point," when he is obscure or talking around a subject. He is speaking his mind in circular fashion. You may have to listen carefully to get what he's driving at and you may have to settle in for a long wait. Try to mirror the way the other person speaks in a manner that's not incongruent with your verbal style.

It's not always easy. Even small-town natives, after living for a spell in the city, have to work to avoid being brusque. Says Laurie Moorefield Forbes, a financial communications manager in Boston, who returned to her hometown of Mount Airy after living away for almost two decades, "I do check myself to see if I'm being abrupt." Several times since her return from Bean Town, she's gotten the impression that her direct manner and speech have put off some of the folks she grew up with. On occasions,

when she's spit something out in a group setting, "it's like a pin drops. No one says anything, and people look at me, and it's like, 'Oh,'" she says. "I don't weave all that language around and soft-pedal it and spoon-feed it. Now I try—before I say something—to make sure they're going to understand it. The person I'm speaking with may be saying the same thing. Sometimes they just take longer to say it."

### *The "N" Word*

Get ready to learn—and then unlearn—a new dirty word: the "N-word." Indeed, "no" is a no-no in a small town and suffers from being too abrupt. If there's any way you can get around it, avoid saying "no."

Likewise, it's a mistake to shoot down people or their proposals. In a small town, consideration is the order of the hour. You protect others from rejection by saying, "Let me think about it," or, if you disagree with something, by saying as little as possible, or couching your differences as gently as possible.

Marie Lewis Judson, a friend from Mount Airy, told of a recent faux pas committed by a woman new to town from Detroit. When the newcomer, whom we'll call Paula, was introduced to some women at the country club, one extended the hand of friendship by saying: "I'll just drop in sometime, and we can have a cigarette."

Paula put her feelings right out front and center: "I don't smoke and I don't permit it in my home."

Her directness put off everyone, including the nonsmokers in the group. Judson recommended an alternative approach that would have achieved the same result. Paula should have graciously accepted the offer and when the caller came and pulled out her cigarettes, she should have mentioned that because of her allergies she could only allow smoking outside. (This would have encouraged the caller's friendship and saved the woman's face in public.)

"That way, no one's feathers would have been ruffled," says Judson. "And she wouldn't have missed out on the opportunity to make a new friend."

### *Ask for Help or Advice*

Everyone likes playing the expert. Small-townners are no exception. Asking for help or advice is one of the easiest ways of getting the verbal ball rolling with strangers, engaging them in your story and your transition into small-town life. It's a classic win/win exchange. The person you've met gets a chance to impart information, and you usually come away much the wiser. It can also be the first step to a new friendship.

From the newcomer's perspective, even the most "ordinary" person you encounter is someone special, the one holding the cards of knowledge about his or her home turf. Think of it this way: If you're lost on a two-lane highway, anyone you meet who can point you in the right direction has a leg up on you. During this brief encounter, that person is your superior and you his or her subordinate.

When you're a newcomer in a small town, you're in the same position. You might ask people where they shop for groceries and why; a good place to buy a car; which third-grade teacher would be best for your hyperactive son. If you need to, take notes. Ask follow-up questions and listen attentively. Be a sponge. Never make the mistake of asking someone's advice, then launching into a rebuttal. Always thank that person after advice is given. If she tells you something you already know, treat it as a new revelation.

When you next see the person, relate the impact his or her pearl of wisdom has had on your life—even if it's incredibly minor. (Remember, no detail is inconsequential in the context of small-town life.) Mention that after you talked, you went directly to the Kroger's on Lebanon Street and were amazed to find your favorite ice cream there. People enjoy knowing that they've touched your life in some small way, and that you've remembered them and their advice.

You will need to be more discriminating about soliciting physical help than verbal advice. Don't flag down your neighbor to ask him to help you move the new sofa into your den. The best way to ask for this kind of assistance is to do so indirectly. Say to

him: "Do you know of anyone I could hire to help me move my sofa?"

More than likely, he'll offer his brute strength at no charge, but phrasing it delicately gives him an out that stops short of having to resort to the dreaded "N" word. He may say: "I'd like to help you, but I'm due downtown at three o'clock. If you haven't found anyone by the time I get back, give me a buzz." It also gives him the opportunity to feel generous by refusing money.

A note of caution. Even with the friendliest of neighbors, be sure never to impose on their generosity. Always thank people for their trouble, even if they merely point you in a direction to find help.

### *Effecting Change*

A move from the city to town is one of the greatest catalysts for creative inspiration and will often spark a stream of new ideas—not only for rearranging your life but on how to improve things in your new community. When you do have suggestions about new ways of doing things, be sure to couch them in a positive, nonthreatening way. Don't come out and say: "I can't believe you've never tried this." Or: "How in the world could you have overlooked this possibility?"

Instead say: "Would you like to hear about what we did in Dallas?" Or: "There's an innovative new method of displaying Christmas ornaments that I noticed in Denver that you might like learning about."

When scouting a new small town in the Southwest, one big-city resident noticed that the local chamber of commerce gave out its promotional brochures stuffed inside a telephone book. After selecting that town, he joined the chamber, and when the time was right, suggested that new folders be printed to give the town "a more professional presentation." His approach made all the difference: Instead of condemning the chamber for its backwardness, he proposed a better way in a positive context—a suggestion that chamber members readily embraced.

"When I joined the women's group at church, I sat and lis-

tened for the longest time,” says Kathleen Norris. “After you’ve listened for a while, they’re willing to listen to you.”

As a (witting or unwitting) agent of change, you’re smart to introduce ideas gradually. Consult with others and win them to your side. When the time is right to take a stand, be sure to think your position through *before* speaking out. “You need to say something that’s halfway reasonable—not the most drastic change in the world—and get people to try it,” advises Norris.

This go-easy approach enabled Norris to become what she calls “a good subversive” in Lemmon. When a controversy erupted over the pastors of her Presbyterian church—whom she believes were mistreated and scapegoated for the farm crisis of the 1980s—Norris forced herself to hold her tongue, “which I don’t normally do. Emotionally, I was very upset. My instinct was to jump into the fray and get vocal about defending them. But the church congregation was divided. I decided speaking out was the worst thing I could do.”

Although she did venture to express some opinions, she managed to refrain from getting emotional. “Everyone knew I was friends with the pastors,” she says. “I’d say things in support of them. But I wouldn’t get caught up in the bitter, crazy fighting.”

The reward for Norris’s self-restraint?

“I was asked to be on the search committee for the next pastor, partly because I hadn’t joined in taking sides. I was one of the first people to be nominated, which surprised me. I was able to effect change that way [in helping to select the new minister].”

“Effecting change involves patience and time—those things that we don’t value in America,” says Norris.

### *Use Code Language*

“Where seldom is heard a discouraging word”

—Lyric from “HOME ON THE RANGE”

The small-town code of conversation evolved over the years as townspeople sought to protect each other’s feelings, to look out

for the general good and to save face for those who might otherwise lose it (as well as for their relatives, friends and associates). Because the small-town credo forbids vicious gossip and direct put-downs (especially for newcomers with whom a level of trust and confidentiality has yet to be established), shades of meaning and truth are often marbled into what might seem to an outsider like innocuous or surprisingly upbeat talk about “sad” stories and “defeated” souls.

When we first moved back to Mount Airy, we became acquainted with one of the saddest sad-luck stories of them all. A brilliant graduate of a prestigious southern university, whom we’ll call Pete, had destroyed his high-powered international banking career by abusing drugs and alcohol. He was then forced to move back into his parents’ home in Mount Airy. He bounced from job to menial job—jobs that family connections helped him obtain. Pete couldn’t hold the fast-food job, was fired from the clothing store when caught imbibing in the stockroom and eventually died in a tragic workplace accident at a hosiery mill. What struck Wanda was the subdued and charitable way people discussed Pete’s plight—right up until his death.

“Things never seem to work out right for Pete,” people would say, before relating his latest job disaster. “Bless his heart,” they’d say and then go on to to bless the hearts of his long-suffering parents. Frank’s mother, Miriam, suggested Pete’s “beverage problem” was responsible for his fall from grace. (She never would use the word alcohol.) “It’s gotten hold of him,” she said, as if referring to some beast that had quite literally sunk its teeth into his flesh and refused to let him loose. “If I’d ever started drinking, I’m sure that would have happened to me,” she added, so as not to sound judgmental. “That’s why I never took it up.”

The emotion people displayed when relating sad tales convinced Wanda of their sincerity. They weren’t sticking a knife in Pete’s back; they derived no pleasure from it. Their concern was genuine. She never once heard anyone descend to cruelty or a lack of compassion by saying something like: “That slobbering drunk has shot himself in the foot again.” Or: “If I were his par-

ents, I'd throw the bum out of the house." This humane approach to discussing problems was revolutionary to Wanda, who'd grown up in a let-it-all-hang-out household of confrontational truth-telling.

Ascribing the best of intentions to a troubled soul is a leading feature of this charitable, small-town code. We often hear things like, "Mary means well, but things never seem to work out right." (Translation: Mary invariably messes things up. Her marriages have failed, ditto friendships, and she was caught shoplifting.) As with Pete, the phrasing lets Mary off the hook by condemning an agent outside herself for her troubles. It's not hypocritical. The generous language leads to a generosity of spirit.

If you hear: "Joe is never able to hold on to a job," the translation is: Don't ever hire Joe; he's a lousy worker.

Code language is often used out of respect when applying labels to people. A dear friend told Wanda that whenever people first meet his mother—a well-known and little-liked battleax—they describe her as a "character." What they mean, he said, is that she's a bitch. Another man in town, when discussing his cousin whom we know well, described her as "a free spirit." What he was really saying is that his cousin is a flake. In Mount Airy, we've noticed that whenever anyone communicates a critical idea about a person, it's always accompanied by a disclaimer. "Now don't get me wrong. I like Emily, but she has a ways to go in the truthfulness department."

Another common practice in small-town parlance when saying something harsh is to include oneself (and/or all of humanity) under the umbrella of fault or susceptibility. Miriam Levering, a minister's daughter who grew up in the small Pennsylvania towns of Coraopolis and New Kensington, was a master of this approach. She'd say: "Like myself, Nancy has a hard time keeping the pounds off." Or: "Like the rest of us, Ronald never likes to surrender center stage." The message is communicated that Nancy eats too much and Ronald talks too much but never once does the listener get the feeling that he or she is participating in a

verbal lynching. You come away seeing your humanity linked with the foibles of these two people; you relearn the lesson that all of us suffer from common weaknesses.

### *Indirect Criticism*

If you put your foot in your mouth (and who among us hasn't?) or repeatedly say or do the wrong thing, how are you going to find out about it so you can amend your errant behavior?

For all the reasons related above, small-townners are unlikely to come right out and directly criticize you or cite any behavioral transgressions you may have made. But if you listen closely to what they say and don't say, you're likely to hear what's on their minds—including feedback about your own performance.

Indeed, foreigners' indirect criticism of visiting Americans is strikingly similar to the phenomenon we've observed in small towns. "If you are with a group of Japanese," writes Craig Storti in *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, "or Thais, and they offer an off-hand criticism of Americans in general, chances are they have just given you a piece of personal feedback on something you've done. If they should go on to specifically exempt you from the criticism—'But you aren't like most Americans'—then you can be *sure* the criticism is aimed at you." (Italics ours.)

By the same token, small-townners who are skeptical of your behavior will often make generalizations about city slickers, Johnny-come-latelies or Yankees (if you've moved to the South) that you *should* consider taking personally.

If you're starting a new business in town, for instance, and you've been running around trying to round up inventory and close the deal with a rental agent, an official at the chamber of commerce may remark: "Some people try to come in here and move too fast." Chances are, he's commenting on you. It's a good idea to review your behavior; try to pinpoint what made him say that.

To give another example, let's say you stop at a yard sale in town and attempt to drive a hard bargain on a used lawnmower. Let's say you make a bid that seriously undercuts the tag price



and that you keep hammering away on why it's in the seller's interest to bite. Perhaps he might say something like: "I like dealing with you. A lot of city folks are too aggressive." What he's really telling you is that you are, too.

A casual remark can often signal constructive criticism, should you pick up on the cue. Once, after Wanda's thrice-weekly swim in Galax, Virginia, she got to chatting with the lifeguard. Wanda said: "It must be tedious sitting up there, watching the lap swimmers go back and forth, up and down the pool."

He said: "Usually I look at swimmers' strokes and go over in my mind how they could be improved."

Wanda realized that he was using code language to signal that he had ideas about improving *her* stroke, but that he'd offer advice only if she wanted to hear it.

Her response was: "How could I improve mine?"

This was the license he needed to launch into a critique of her stroke. He detailed how her right arm was dominant in the stroke but that she wasted energy by splashing it into the water rather than cutting it in neatly; he went on to say that her left stroke was sluggishly inefficient (a surprising revelation, since she's a southpaw).

Although the lifeguard's suggestion may sound trivial, the way in which he broached it is significant; it demonstrates the small-town approach to offering both criticism and advice. Small-townners will let you know what's on their minds, but only after you reassure them that you wish to hear it, often after you prod it out of them. No matter what they say—even if you vehemently disagree—always remember to thank them for their ideas and opinions.

## DISCIPLINE

### *Self-Discipline*

It takes effort to be an active listener and a disciplined conversationalist. Although these skills bear cultivating in places urban as well as rural, they're especially important in the context of small towns. Exercising self-discipline—whether by holding your

tongue when every cell in your body is aching to speak out, restraining yourself from blasting someone when you feel you've been crossed or simply in sublimating the emotion of the moment—is a survival skill in a small town. Failure to do so will cost you dearly.

### *“Instinct Override”*

One of the best ways to cultivate a disciplined approach is to suppress the impulse to speak or act out of turn and to develop the skills of observation. It's an ability that cross-cultural trainer and author Craig Storti terms “instinct override.” It means simply that when in a new culture, you should override your first instincts and approach the locals with what he calls “caution and circumspection,” which will enable you to “sidestep some of the more obvious cultural traps.”

Day-in and day-out self-discipline may prove difficult for many former city residents to achieve. It can be especially challenging to Baby Boomers who were raised to believe that self-discipline was square—perhaps even obsolete—or, at the very least, less important than such goals as self-expression and self-fulfillment.

### *No More “Throwaway” People*

Over the last few generations, the character of all Americans, but particularly Baby Boomers—and especially *urban* Baby Boomers—has begun to resemble that of the careless consumer. If a friendship, relationship, or marriage wasn't working, people became accustomed to wadding it up, throwing it away and replacing it as quickly as possible. Using discipline to maintain personal relationships was all but discarded.

When you're in a city, it is easier to “throw away” people than it is in a small town. In the city, you can date someone until he starts to seem ordinary or until his weaknesses emerge and then dump him in a proverbial heartbeat. And you may never see that person again. There are few (if any) social consequences to pay.

Such tactics will backfire on you in a small town—and not

only on the dating circuit but in every arena of life. You *will* see that “throwaway” person again and again—at the market, at the post office, in line at the bank. It’s important to part as amicably as possible. The cardinal rule in a small town is to treat everyone fairly.

### *No Burning Bridges or Holding Grudges*

A disciplined approach in a small town requires you to hang in there with others through the tough times—theirs, yours and theirs as they affect yours. You’ll need to rise above not only the petty slight but the major transgression to stick it out for the long haul. In a small town, you should never burn bridges behind you or vent your anger carelessly.

“It doesn’t do any good to hold grudges,” asserts Frank Crail, founder and CEO of the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory in Durango, Colorado. Crail himself has the grounds to hold a few if he chose to, having received scant support from the local financial and economic-development communities when his company needed infusions of cash. But he and his wife and their seven children have made a commitment to stay in Durango, and they realize that the only way to flourish is to rise above past slights and get on with the business of succeeding.

If you’re convinced that no malice was intended when you were wronged, you’re well advised to let go of your grievances. We know of an instance in a small midwestern town where a young woman’s physician, who was also a close personal friend, made a serious judgment error which almost cost her her life. But because she was convinced that no malice was intended—it was a mere oversight—the subject was never spoken of again. However, the woman quietly sought the services of another doctor.

In a small town, you’ll need to let go of the notion that being true to yourself and indiscriminately expressing your feelings is your highest priority. Making it in a small town invariably involves revisiting the notion that honoring your private lights should be your paramount concern. Honoring your new community and its mores and manners is the appropriate substitute.

### *You Make the Effort*

Even if you're disciplined in your approach to establishing a base for yourself in your small town, don't expect everything to fall into place automatically for you. As the newcomer, the ball is in your court. You're still going to have to expend the effort to carve out a niche for yourself.

"I don't think community comes to you," says Frank Crail. "In a small town, everyone may be friendly, and it may be easy to meet people. But a lot of that is superficial. If you're going to get involved in community, *you* have to make the effort."

### *Let Your Individuality Emerge . . . Gradually*

"Don't spring your differences on others before you get to know them," recommends one small-towner. "Tread softly." Let your character emerge gradually. Someone who wears well over time will make more of a lasting impression than a flash in the pan. As with good writing, it's best to reveal your character through your actions rather than broadcast it through your words.

## **BEHAVIOR**

We've already relayed a whole host of suggestions relating to your attitude in a small town. Additional behavioral pointers to help ease the transition and adjustment to small-town life follow.

### *Slow Your Pace*

Slowing your pace is a necessary adjustment for most high-strung ex-urbanites. The person in a hurry is viewed with wariness, even suspicion, in a small town. A quick step and rushed manner are the marks of an outsider, much as the slow-stepping skyscraper-gawker signals an out-of-town visitor to a New Yorker or a Chicagoan.

### *Be Punctual*

A part of slowing your pace involves leaving yourself cushions of time when configuring your day so that you're not hurried or running chronically late. Slowing your pace allows you to have

time to visit with people who might call or those you might run into in town.

In most small towns, people are punctual, if not early, for just about everything. Arriving late at a dinner party or an appointment is considered a major faux pas. We learned the hard way. Once we arrived at a wedding that was scheduled to begin at 6 P.M. at one minute of. The processional had already begun.

Indeed, some small-townners even vie for the designation of early bird. This contest can carry an almost moral overtone, determining who is Earlier Than Thou. A friend of Wanda's—the owner of a local convenience-store chain who believes punctuality to be a virtue right up there with integrity—kindly offered to drive her to district court in Danbury, North Carolina, to help her fight a speeding ticket. Knowing his feelings about punctuality, Wanda arrived at the designated meeting place ten minutes ahead of time.

It wasn't early enough. He was already there, sitting inside his running vehicle. He might have been waiting an hour. She didn't ask how long he'd been there and offered no apology for being later than he. However, when they returned from the trip, she thanked him profusely for his trouble and offered to buy him lunch.

### *Adjust to the "DI's"*

To avoid ruffling local feathers, city people need to make time for what Ann Moltu Ashman, an insurance salesperson in Elkin, North Carolina, calls the "DI's" (drop-ins). Ashman and her husband, Ron Ashman, had lived and worked in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Stamford, Connecticut, before moving to Elkin in 1983. In Stamford, not only did neighbors in their swanky neighborhood never drop in, but they were likely to refuse to open the door if you tried.

Ann Ashman remembers one holiday when Ron had gone door to door to distribute invitations to a neighborhood New Year's Day party they were throwing. "One lady wouldn't open the door to accept the invitation," she says. "A few close friends came, but the party was not well attended. We got the message that Stamford wasn't the place for us."

When the Ashmans moved to Elkin, where Ron Ashman took an executive position with a textile manufacturer, the couple was confronted with the opposite problem: a surfeit of neighborliness.

"The community was very embracing, largely due to Ron's boss," Ann says. "They could not have been warmer. I almost couldn't believe the extent to which we were welcomed." That initial welcome phase seemingly never ended, and people continued to drop in on the Ashmans—especially on Ann, who was at home preparing for the birth of their first child. Now that Ann is working full-time, the problem has abated, but they still chuckle over drop-in guests.

"We call them the 'DI's,'" says Ann. "They never call. They assume their schedule is yours. I used to get uptight about it. I've changed."

She's come to accept dropping in as a part of the social culture of Elkin and as an act of friendliness rather than one of insensitivity. While it did take some jaw-setting discipline to let go of the tightly scheduled, DayMinder approach she'd pursued in the city, today, after twelve years, she's embraced the "DI" practice and is a hearty practitioner of it. "Now I drop in on other people to let them know how it feels," she jokes. "Seriously, I've changed in a positive way."

### *Avoid Discussing Education/Elite Cultural Tastes*

If you come into town with designer diplomas and elite or esoteric cultural tastes—and the educational level of the community is low or people don't sit anywhere near the cutting edge of city-defined culture—you're wise to downplay these subjects.

Jim Van Zandt, a restaurant owner in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida, for instance, makes it a point never to discuss education with employees. "You can't come in and say, 'Go on to college,' or 'How come you didn't graduate high school?'" he says. "In the big picture, they understand the message, 'Stay in school.' But I don't get into conversations about what people shoulda, coulda, woulda done." For Van Zandt's employees who remain in school, he does his part to encourage them to stay—and keep their

grades up. He and his wife check their student-employees' report cards. "They can't work if they get anything below a C," he says.

By the same token, in most instances, it's unwise to broadcast your own college degree, or advanced academic or professional credentials (unless you're hanging a shingle as an attorney). If your degree is from a prestigious university or an Ivy League institution, unless you are asked directly where you went to school, by all means keep it to yourself. This is especially true in the infancy of a relationship. Once people get to know you and realize you're a regular Joe (or Josie), you can dribble out more and more personal information.

Remember that the last thing you want to do is get people's backs up and stir any latent feelings of inadequacy. Small-townners are sensitive to anything that smacks of condescension or superiority; some may fear that because they haven't seen the world as you presumably have, or because they've never tested their wings in a big-city job market, that they're somehow out of your league. These are feelings you'll want to dispel if you want to establish a comfort zone.

"Some of the people who never left are very self-derogatory," says Virginia Emerson Hopkins, who returned to her hometown of Anniston, Alabama, in 1991 after more than a decade of practicing law in Washington, D.C. "They commuted from home to the local university, graduated, got married and stayed. They're self-derogatory about never having left." When confronted with others' feelings of inadequacy, Hopkins's tack is to be jokingly self-deprecatory. "I just say: 'Some people like me are slow learners. It took me a long time to come back.'"

#### DEVELOP A WEB OF FAVORS AND DEPENDENCIES

One surefire method of ingratiating yourself to others in a small town comes from the old adage that if you want a friend, you have to *be* a friend. We've noticed that small-townners develop webs of favors and dependencies. There's no reason a newcomer can't work her way into these webs by spinning some fibers of her own. One of the best web-weavers we've met in Mount Airy is a

State Farm insurance salesperson named Janet K. Edwards. In 1988, she moved to Mount Airy from rural southwestern Virginia, without knowing a soul in town. In just seven years, Edwards has managed to develop a wide circle of friends, place herself at the center of community activity *and* build a thriving business.

How?

By old-fashioned good-deed-doing and extending a helping hand to those in need. Edwards volunteers to squire around the elderly mothers of friends and clients on historic house tours. She celebrates friends' achievements, remembers birthdays and holidays with greeting cards and bottles of wine or boxes of chocolate. She participates in (if she doesn't organize) activities ranging from chamber social hours to Rotary fund-raisers. She purchased a ticket to go to Oakland with 55 Mount Airians to cheer on town presenters competing for the 1994 All-America City designation. Edwards knocks herself out to be useful, and, in so doing, has endeared herself to her adopted community.

Just as you should develop a giving attitude, you should also follow Edwards's lead in doing as many favors as possible and saying "yes" as often as you possibly can. Yeses will help build your "community bank account" of goodwill with each person for whom you've done a favor, and, in turn, they will help spread a favorable buzz about you around town. Eventually, these deposits will accrue to you with interest. Remember that the value of your friendships and of being known as a community player are significant components of your "wealth" in town.

One final caveat. Don't be too eager to demand *quid pro quo* or take credit for what you've done. People will remember what you've contributed, even if they don't always have the good manners to thank you or return the favor.

### *Embrace Conspiracies of Kindness*

Among the most touching phenomena we've witnessed since making Mount Airy our hometown—something we never saw in Los Angeles—are what we call conspiracies of kindness.



These arise when ad hoc cabals form to help protect someone from his own blunders and gaffes, to shield that person from the naked truth or to spare him unnecessary suffering.

This phenomenon came into focus for Wanda after she saw a program at the Mount Airy Rotary Club in July of 1993. A district official for the Salvation Army drove an hour and a half from Charlotte to give the program at the regular Tuesday lunch meeting. The man opened by saying how happy he was to be in "Andy Griffin's hometown." He mentioned the actor by name several times, and though the actor's name is not Griffin but Griffith, each of the seventy-odd people assembled stifled the urge to say: "If you're going to drop someone's name, at least get it right."

But this was a minor matter compared to the fiasco that followed. For his program, the man played a videotape about the Salvation Army's Hurricane Andrew relief and cleanup efforts. That was fine . . . except for the fact that the club—an assemblage of high-powered business leaders and executives—had already viewed the tape several months earlier in a previous program. What amazed Wanda was that the *entire* group sat politely through the presentation again, and not one person nodded off or left impatiently. Come the question and answer period, someone even raised his hand and posed a courtesy question. And even though the speaker had done his homework poorly, he was graciously thanked by the club president, given the standard souvenir pen and sent on his way with his head held high, his dignity intact.

From our interviews, we found that this dynamic is fairly common among small towns. These collective acts of benevolence, conspiracies of kindness, rarely occur in cities. If the same scenario unfolded in Los Angeles—or even in Charlotte—you can bet someone would grow impatient and storm out, or speak up: "We've already seen this one. You're wasting our time."

### *Forgive: It's the Ultimate Healer*

Of all the suggestions and rules outlined throughout, the one key to keep in mind about the small-town mentality is that people are

ultimately forgiving. Just as you can't afford to blow others off, neither can they you—even if you've committed some transgression. Even if you violate the small-town code (and everyone is guilty of a misstep now and then), rest assured that people will cut you some slack. Usually people come around in the end.

And once you've established yourself as a community player, even if you get into serious trouble, they'll let you off the hook. "After a few years, they'll accept just about *anything* you do, as long as it's not some heinous crime," asserts Laurie Moorefield Forbes. "Small-town folk are, in general, very forgiving because they know a person's history and mitigating circumstances. We often don't give people enough credit for that. Say someone cheated the IRS and got caught. In a few years, they'll say: 'He got into some trouble with the IRS. But he's a good fellow.'"

#### ENDEARING YOURSELF TO THE LOCALS AND BUILDING GOODWILL

##### *Patronize Local Merchants*

Nothing engenders goodwill as quickly as buying from local merchants rather than giving your business to chain stores or buying out of town. For anyone who wants to be part of a community, this is perhaps the quickest way to score points; and it's doubly important if you're trying to set up your own business. Unless you're positively strapped for cash, it's worth it to spend the extra money on merchandise acquired locally, including big-ticket items, such as refrigerators, washing machines and vehicles. (Remember, local merchants will also feel responsible to replace or repair if problems arise. And, because you're right there in front of them, they can't shirk accountability.)

Tanya B. Rees says she buys "100 percent of what I wear on my body" at her husband's clothing shop, The Addition, in downtown Mount Airy. "Gene is extremely committed not only to Mount Airy but to downtown. He's like, 'Get it downtown.' He would not even *consider* going out of town to buy a car. It's a given he'll buy it here." Even if you end up paying

something of a premium for the product, “You’ll get it back,” declares Rees. “Because in a small town, no one forgets.”

While you’re buying, get acquainted with the salesperson and/or owner. Take an interest in the establishment: How long has it been in business? What is it known for? Take this opportunity to tell them what you’re doing in town.

### *Never Say Things Are “Quaint”*

The things you think are quaint or quirky may be the very things that the locals despise, such as antiquated machinery or pre-computer-age methods. Maybe you’re charmed by a post office where you have to walk upstairs to get to the post office boxes (while the locals and the postal workers hate the inconvenience but have never been able to find the funds to build a new one). If you think something is quaint, hold your tongue. What you say might sound patronizing.

“Outsiders always come here and say, ‘Look at the nice dirt lanes that go into the woods,’” says Jim Van Zandt of Santa Rosa Beach, Florida. “Locals can’t stand them. They go nuts over dirt lanes. When it rains, red clay gets on their cars. Out-of-staters think it’s quaint to have people down on the docks cutting fish. Locally, they’re called ‘fishheads.’ If someone gets mad at you, he calls you a fishhead. Fishheads are the people you don’t want your kids to hang out with.”

### *Find Common Ground*

Instead of always accenting your own individuality, or the differences between you and others, work to find common ground in conversation. Let’s say you’re a rabid Democrat and you meet up with an equally vehement Republican. Do not get into political tussling right away. Instead find common interests in sports, children or community history—even that old standby, the weather. If you work at it, you’ll always be able to find common interests and avoid potentially inflammatory material.

By all means, avoid proselytizing about any subject. If people

agree with you, they'll be bored. If they disagree with you, they'll be put off by having to listen.

### *Always Donate Things*

When asked, contribute what you can. If a community group is trying to raise funds for a worthy enterprise, by all means, chip in. In a recent money-raising campaign in which Wanda participated to market Mount Airy after it won the All-America City designation, businesses were asked to contribute \$250. Obviously, some businesses couldn't go that far, but the smart ones responded with encouraging words and more modest contributions.

Fran Van Zandt says that she and her husband have made it a policy to be yeasayers whenever any worthwhile community group solicits a contribution. They give gifts in-kind, such as a catered party for fifteen, a full sheet cake, whole fillets of beef, breakfast for two, lunch for two. "Because of the business we're in, it's easy to meet people," she says. "We say yes to a lot of people we might not have before. We're soft touches but there's also a payback to it."

Likewise, at the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory, Frank Crail says that his company makes it a policy to respond to "every worthy organization that calls" with gifts of cash or chocolate. It recently donated \$25,000 to a concert-hall campaign, and overall giving "runs in excess of \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year," says Crail. For the last eight years, the company has thrown an annual Christmas party for 150 underprivileged children. "It's a very high priority to give back to the community in any area that will help. We have a high social conscience." This giving spirit has helped make Crail and his company a well-loved winner.

### *Join Clubs and Volunteer*

Don't sit at home waiting for the phone to ring. Remember that small-townners may be intimidated by you and may be afraid to ask you to join a club, committee or enterprise. So step forward.

Although you don't want to join *every* club in town just be-

cause it's there, you should select the one or ones that complement your interests. Then join and be a doer. The best way to demonstrate your commitment is to raise your hand every time the club calls for volunteers. Offer to sell hot dogs at ball games and give out pizza slices at the walkathon fund-raiser. Clean up after parties or luncheons and offer to try to recruit guest speakers for programs. You can type the minutes and take out the trash. Make yourself useful. Nothing will earn you credibility so quickly as pitching in.

### *Issue Compliments Liberally*

No social lubricant works so effectively to grease the wheels of goodwill and positive feelings than conferring praise on others. Although you never want to be disingenuous, you do want to give praise when it's called for. Look for ways in which you see people excel and hand out specific praise. It's free; it's uplifting; and it does wonders for the spirits of those around you, which in turn accrues to you. At the Mount Airy Rotary Club, members are big praise-givers. They compliment everything from perceptive questions to striking apparel to mentions in the local newspaper.

### *Make it a Point to Socialize with Natives*

Like college freshmen, some newcomers fall into the trap of unwittingly forming separatist cliques that exclude natives. Although hanging out with fellow newcomers whom you meet will allow you to compare notes, air grievances and express homesickness, doing so exclusively will deprive you of the opportunity to mix and mingle with longtime residents and natives, which is essential for full integration into the life in the community.

"Some outsiders come in and make their own society," grouses one longtime small-towner about the behavior of newcomers. "They don't even try to get involved." Failure to engage with the locals will give off the message of a certain skittish noncommitment on your part to the town and could set up a vicious cycle in which you become excluded from local goings-on.

Although in many places you'll be welcomed by natives with open arms, dinner invitations and such things as squash casseroles and peach cobblers, if you don't find a Welcome Wagon knocking at your door, you'll need to take the initiative and invite others over for a meal or cake and coffee.

### *Join a Church*

Linda T. Lastinger, a physician specializing in internal medicine who moved with her physician husband from North Carolina's Research Triangle to Galax, Virginia, in 1980, advises others following the same trajectory to join a church (or synagogue or mosque). Aside from the spiritual rewards, church membership is enormously beneficial in bringing you into the church family and community. Church life is often fun, with youth groups and religious study for children and teens and day-care preschoolers. It's also a way of meeting people when they're at their most generous.

### *Join a Country Club*

Belonging to a country club can also promote your integration into the life of a community—provided you can afford it. (Rates should be considerably lower in small towns than in big cities. Annual dues at the Lastingers' Galax club cost just \$300 a year.) Little works better to get the social juices flowing than rubbing elbows with someone out on the putting green, at the club lounge or playing a round of tennis.

### *Deal with Gossip*

There's no way around it. When you move to a small town, you're guaranteed to be the subject of gossip. "It's the fun of a small town, to hear the gossip!" exclaims Marie Judson of Mount Airy.

"For a newcomer to get angry about gossip is really naive, like moving to New York City and complaining that it's dirty," says Kathleen Norris, whose home in Lemmon, South Dakota, is just three blocks south of the North Dakota state line. "No one would recognize a small town if everyone—and especially newcom-

ers—weren't raked over the coals. Newcomers are a wonderful toy chest. Why did they move here? What's wrong with them? Even if you do everything by the book, people will be trying to peek under the shades."

As a newcomer (though not exactly outsider), Norris is well-acquainted with the workings of the rumor mill. When she and her writer husband, David Dwyer, arrived in town in 1974 and moved into Norris's late grandparents' home, Dwyer looked for work as a bartender at a "beer bar" in town. Even though he had the entree of being "Doc Totten's grandson-in-law," his long hair and New York accent made him somewhat suspect. "The woman who owned the bar said some people had told her David was a drug dealer. Others said he was a federal narcotics agent," Norris remembers with a chuckle. "She told him, 'I figured I couldn't lose.'"

And when a limited edition of Norris's book, *Dakota: A Spiritual Biography* was published by Ticknor and Fields in January 1993, "wild rumors started to fly" about its contents.

Out of town when the book was first published, Norris heard the townsfolks' reaction through the grapevine. "People were saying I used real names, and they were all prepared to get hysterical," she remembers. "People were talking about the book but it turns out that none of them had *read* it. When they started reading it, they discovered it wasn't as bad as they thought."

Norris was amused by those individuals who didn't recognize themselves in some of the thinly veiled, more cryptic portraits; some even complimented the book. "They didn't recognize themselves and said what a great book it was!" she chuckles. Now the town has developed "a kind of wary pride" in *Dakota*. The book is being sold at the chamber of commerce, the newspaper office, the dimestore and drugstore, since there is no bookstore in town.

Linda Lastinger says the best way to avoid gossip is simply to detach yourself from the grapevine. If people talk about you, at least you won't know about it. "People in town really respect my

privacy," she says. "Maybe they know I'm interested in respecting other people's privacy." By refusing to provide a receptive ear to gossip or an active mouth to spread it, you'll diminish its effect on your life.

However, it's *impossible* to avoid the small-town grapevine altogether. "Len loves to tell the story about how he pronounced a fellow dead at the hospital," says Linda Lastinger, "and I knew about it before he got home five minutes later."

#### RETURNING TO THE HOMETOWN OF YOUR YOUTH

If you're returning to the hometown of your youth, you're in a special position, beset by the advantages and disadvantages of being a native daughter or son. You've got names, contacts and common history with others. You may have family in town or, at the very least, common memories and reference points with those who live here. By the same token, if you're like most people, you've got a certain amount of baggage, as well—personal and familial.

It will be almost impossible to start with a completely clean slate. You're still Jimmy, the kid who knocked a ball into the plate-glass window of the Woolworth's downtown, or Dori, the girl who threw up on stage during the premiere of the class play. Or maybe you're Angie, the homecoming queen, or Rick, the boy who broke the school record for the 100-yard dash, or Thomas, the heartthrob.

But unless you had a terrible reputation or committed a crime, in most cases, having a history in town will work to your advantage, provided you don't attempt to rest on your laurels. But be forewarned: you do run into the danger of being typecast from the past; in some cases, people may think they already know all they need to know about you, without bothering to learn about the new person you've become.

"As people know your family, they think they know you," says Laurie Moorefield Forbes, who moved back to Mount Airy from Boston in 1988, after having lived there almost twenty years.



*Followed by the Family Name*

In Frank's case, he had a family name that was widely recognized locally. The Levering name was associated with a high degree of abstract (but not practical) intelligence, eccentricity and political idealism—not sound business judgment. This perception posed an obstacle to Frank when he set the goal of pulling our orchard business out of debt and making it profitable. When he behaved contrary to his father's style, some locals resisted, yearning for the good old days. For example, when attempting to collect a bill on the spot as opposed to "carrying" someone on credit, Frank might hear something slightly accusatory like: "Mr. Sam didn't do me this way." It proved a challenge for Frank to establish a set of rules and behaviors independent of his parents. When he was able to pull it off, he was able to step out of his father's shadow and establish his own individual identity.

*Being Your Own Person*

Although Kathleen Norris was neither an insider nor an outsider (having vacationed for summers at her mother's hometown), she nevertheless felt the weight of family expectations descend on her when she moved to Lemmon, South Dakota, in 1974. Her grandfather had been everyone's doctor and her mother a high-minded Presbyterian. "If people go back with preconceived roles from family history, it can be a hovering ghost or confining strait-jacket," says Norris. "If they try to fit themselves into a mold, it might not work."

She was able to separate herself from preconceived expectations by picking and choosing what she wanted to do. "I was supposed to join the fanciest ladies' club in town and turned them down nicely, gently. I wasn't supposed to know who my sponsor was (but I did). I said, 'Lucille, Grandmother would be disappointed.' But I didn't feel I could step into my grandmother's shoes."

Norris did, however, join her grandparents' church. At first, she felt as if she were "putting on [her] grandmother's role. After a couple of years, I realized it was something I wanted to do for me, too."

*Don't Expect It to Be the Way It Was*

Several friends of Laurie Forbes's—also members of Mount Airy High School's class of 1965—moved back to town, expecting life to be the way it had been back then. "They were disappointed," she says. Those who were made short work of their stay and moved on.

Get this straight: moving back to your hometown is "*not* like stepping back in time," says Virginia Emerson Hopkins, who returned in 1991 to her hometown of Anniston, Alabama, after living in the Washington, D.C., area for more than ten years. "You're a different person and guess what? So's the town! Maybe there aren't five hundred new buildings, and they haven't torn up the streets, but the town *has* changed. There's a new mayor, new high schools have been built, people have left, moved in, died, divorced. Anyone who thinks they can step back in time to the place they left is going to be disappointed. It's kind of like going back to college after you've graduated. The buildings—maybe the teachers—are the same, but it's not the same. It's a different world."

Often, you'll have nothing in common with the people you went to high school with, except the past, which gets old fast. And often, the friends you expect to be there for you won't come through, while new ones will unexpectedly appear. Like other newcomers, you'll go through the "honeymoon stage" of buzzing around reacquainting yourself with old friends and meeting new ones, before settling into friendships with the people who will count.

*Strong Sense of Self*

If you had problems with the town while you were growing up (and who among those who've fled hasn't?), be sure you've resolved them and feel strongly enough established in your own identity before you return.

"If you don't have a strong sense of self, you'll feel like you have to act and play a role (to conform to the small-town code),"

advises Forbes. "But if you're a strong person, you have yourself anyway and are not threatened by not doing what the natives do."

### *Timing Is Everything*

The time to return to your hometown is at that moment when your yearning for the town outweighs your apprehension about moving back. One thing most returnees agree upon is that their tenure in the big city prepared them for the return, making it feel like a voluntary effort rather than an obligatory move. City life broadened them and enabled them to come back to small-town life with a newer, more cosmopolitan perspective—to feel not saddled but rather uplifted by it.

"If you like the present, you shouldn't throw stones at the past," says Hopkins. "I didn't need to come to Anniston straight out of law school." And she shouldn't have. She came at precisely the right juncture—when she wanted to lay down roots for herself, her husband and her two sons and spend time with her aging mother.

Ironically, often it is precisely those who were most eager to escape their hometowns who find themselves called back home. When Mount Airy native Burke Robertson graduated from Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina, in 1969, he had the option of returning to join the family business. But, he says, he categorically ruled it out. "Mount Airy was not the place I wanted to live under any circumstances. I wanted something different. So I went to Atlanta—that was the big city at the time—to make my way." Twenty-two years later, the town Robertson felt compelled to flee lured him back.

Likewise, after Mount Airy native Robert Merritt graduated from Mount Airy High School in 1944, he said, "There's a country-western song that could have been my theme song back then: 'Happiness Is Mount Airy in the Rear-View Mirror.' I thought everything important and significant in the world was happening somewhere else. Growing up, I always thought of Mount Airy as

a one-horse town—provincial and quaint.” By 1953, when Merritt returned with his wife, Cama Clarkson Merritt, he’d come to realize that the rest of the world was a one-horse place, too. Mount Airy looked better than ever as a place to start a family and grow a business.

Though returning sons and daughters may start out with advantages, ultimately, like everyone else, they’re on their own to clear a path. Laurie Forbes describes those whom she knew from before as being very welcoming when she first moved back with her Boston-bred husband. “They were very accepting and helpful. That’s real nice. But after that initial couple of months after you’ve come back and everyone’s seen you, everyone goes on with their lives.”

After the initial welcome, it’s up to you, the returning native daughter or son, to pick up the ball and carry it. To prove once again that you can play by the rules governing small-town life and forge a new place for yourself.

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#### ARE SMALL TOWNS RIGHT FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR?

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**Y**our most immediate response to this question might be no—especially in those small towns which have negligible minority populations or are located in areas of the country long thought to be racist, such as the South. But think again. In fact, a small town may be the *best* place for people of color—even if you find one in which there may not be great numbers of people from your particular racial or ethnic group living there.

A recent editorial in *Small Town* dispels the notion that small towns are poor places for minorities. “Many small towns have the capability to heal wounds caused by discrimination. . . . Simply knowing somebody, knowing their family and knowing what they go through forces people to understand.”

“If you have to interact with someone who is not like you,

often you find out that they're not the stereotype," says Ken Munsell, editor of *Small Town*.

### YOU STAND OUT AS AN INDIVIDUAL

Understand that as an educated and motivated newcomer of color or ethnicity, you *will* stand out in the crowd. Once people have processed the fact of your race, the good news is that you'll be noticed as an individual. Assuming that you follow the small-town code, you're more apt to be viewed as an individual than merely as an African-American, Asian-American or Hispanic. This individuation will happen more quickly and more completely than in a city in part because of the enormous curiosity about you. If you play your cards right, in some respects, you, as a minority member, may even be ahead of the game.

This was precisely the case for Esther Nettles Rauch, who, as an extroverted, savvy and highly educated African-American, moved to tiny Castine, Maine, with her WASP husband, retired Navy Admiral Charles F. "Chick" Rauch in 1981. Esther threw herself into community life; she joined the Episcopal church and the Castine Scientific Society of the Wilson Museum and took a last-minute, full-time, fill-in job teaching freshman composition at the Maine Maritime Academy in Castine. (In true small-town fashion, she got the job after their *realtor* told the dean about the qualifications of his new client, who was then working toward her Ph.D. in English.)

The interracial couple quickly became the toast of the town. Why?

With their social skills, easy empathy and piquant backgrounds, Esther and Chick would have been welcomed no matter what their race. But her being black created an added incentive for the many Castiners who'd never been close to an African-American.

"They were curious about why a black woman would want to move to a small Maine town," says Rauch. "They wanted

to know: Would I stay?" (The couple has lived in Castine and now nearby Orono, Maine, for a total of fifteen years. Today Esther Rauch is something of a local legend.)

### THEY'RE SEEKING DIVERSITY (TO KEEP UP WITH THE REST OF AMERICA)

Don't for a moment think that small-townners are oblivious to the larger society as it's changing around them. Small-townners are aware of the need as a society to become more multicultural and inclusive, to bring women and people of color into the inner sanctums of power. When Wanda attended high school in Orono, Maine, from which she graduated in 1974 in a class of eighty-three, there was only one black student at the school, a year younger than she. The girl was hot stuff—the Oprah Winfrey of Orono High. A gifted athlete, a good student and universally liked, she had it all over everyone else. It was hip—if not politically correct (before the term was invented)—to be her friend. We've known other African-Americans, like this girl, for whom race was an advantage in the context of scarcity.

Living in Americus, Georgia (population 16,512), Habitat for Humanity's Floyd Nelson is far from being the only African-American. However, the former Atlantan, who grew up in Milwaukee, has been pleasantly surprised by the fabric of life in a region of the country that was once overwhelmingly racist. He advises other African-Americans moving to the small-town South to come with "an open mind. Don't assume anything moving in."

"The South has the factual reputation of being the bastion of racism and segregation. But 1996 is not the same as 1956, and people are different. Come and experience what was, what is and what is to be all at the same time."

The social fabric of Americus is already changing for the better and, in the future, Nelson envisions a more racially integrated society. "You're going to have more of a meshing to-

gether of individuals of different backgrounds, communities, families. Americus is both segregated and integrated. I go to a variety of churches—some white, some black, some intermingled. I tend to go to Baptist churches. In some white churches, I'd be the only black person there. I'd be treated with respect. Some people would feel uncomfortable. But I, for the most part, would be comfortable."

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## YOU'VE ARRIVED!

"Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness; natives give it solidity and continuity; but the settlers give it passion."

—E. B. WHITE, *Here Is New York*

Just as new New Yorkers give the city its passion, so do new arrivals to small-town America. As a newcomer, carrying the banner of change (along with elements of surprise and mystery), you're a charged entity, endowed with the ability to attract and repel. Coming in from the outside, you have fresh blood and insight, and the power to provide leadership for change.

### *What You Can Contribute*

Once you've learned the lay of the land, mastered the code of small-town life, broken into "the club," and removed the "O word" (outsider) from your forehead, you'll be able to champion social change more effectively and significantly than you would ever have been able to in the city. You'll make a place for yourself—and take your place alongside the stalwarts of the town—once you determine what offering of your talents you can bring to the table, what is your signature "dish."

"You need to figure out what you can contribute to a community yourself," says Janet Topolsky, associate director of the rural economic policy program of the Aspen Institute in Washington,

D.C. "Small towns are intimate. Just as you can be miserable in a family, you can be miserable in a small town unless there's a piece of community to which you can contribute, and it can contribute back to you."

Chris Murray, the waterfowl carver in Castine, Maine, found out that he could not only contribute his pieces of artwork to local charities but that he could give to his community by volunteering to coach golf at the high school.

When she moved from Boston back to her hometown of Mount Airy, Laurie Moorefield Forbes was called upon to teach "assertiveness" to nurse-trainees and leadership development skills to scholarship students at Surry Community College.

In addition to her teaching, Philadelphia native Marion Goldwasser filled a community-service niche in Hillsville, Virginia, by periodically gathering together minivans of students to make the two-hour drive to Roanoke to hear authors read. She took groups to Charlottesville to tour the University of Virginia campus in the hopes of encouraging kids to apply there. (Oddly enough, it's a rarity in rural southwestern Virginia for college-bound students to even consider UVA.)

When he returned to his hometown of Mount Airy from Charlotte, real estate developer Burke Robertson worked to bring city hall closer to the chamber of commerce. He helped revitalize the downtown by renovating a dilapidated minimall near Main Street and chasing down new tenants for it as well as filling vacant storefronts downtown.

Professional dancer and choreographer Betsy Ogden, who moved from Manhattan to rural Washington state, found that she could bring her expertise to the town of Ellensburg in the form of dance classes.

Once you've figured out what you can give, you're en route to becoming a successful cultural transplant. You now understand two cultures, can walk two walks and talk two talks and can move easily between big city and small town; this ability gives you a fluency and flexibility that many small-towners lack. You



can bring this outside expertise into the well of your small-town self and draw from it when bestowing your gifts on the small town and developing your perspective. Unlike some small-townners, who are here by default, you will be glad to know that you've tried both worlds and are here by choice.

Once you determine what "piece" is uniquely yours to contribute and carve out a niche that no one else fills, you'll be able to make the ultimate transition and commitment to your town. This final move—in which, in some important way, you take on as your own the identity of the town, while deciding what to give to sustain it—will likely correspond with the townsfolks' acceptance of you. It is at this moment that you've arrived. With the exception of native sons and daughters returning to their hometowns, this final transition into community life may take up to five years.

By now, you've assembled all the tools you need to make a place for yourself in your small town. You've learned (or are learning) a mode of behavior and a code of conduct that are very likely more livable, forgiving, and humane than anything you've ever experienced in the city. You may have discovered for the first time that precious element of life called community that many Americans never experience.

Living in a small town can be confining at times; it can, at times, feel like you're living in a fishbowl; and, yes, there may be occasions when you get possessive about your life, which is not entirely your own. Gossip about you may get back to you, and you may at times become overextended; but consider the rewards. You've got a place that you will come to know well, a community which you can help shape and influence, with people you will come to know over time in multiple contexts. The right small town may be the very best place in America in which to raise children and where seniors can age with grace and dignity. It may well be the best place in the world for you as an adult to develop your capabilities and career or to grow your business. It may be the best place for you to solve problems in the context of a

community, to reconnect with humanity and to come fully alive.

It has worked that way for us. We feel more alive here than anywhere else, moving forward with a set of characters and a giant family we never had before. But probably the most significant and valuable lesson we've learned in our ten years living in a small town can be summed up this way: Learning how to live in a small town is learning how to live.