



As regular readers know, every six months or so I'm helplessly compelled to wax rhapsodic about life in Beaufort. It usually happens in spring or fall, when the sheer awesomeness of this little town just flat-out overwhelms me. When you're driving or walking or riding your bike around a place, and you find yourself repeatedly choking back tears of joy and gratitude, there's really nothing to do but put it down on paper. (Correction: You can also point out blooming bushes and greening marshes to your kid in the back seat with such fervor – and frequency – that she rolls her eyes in your rear view mirror and asks you to please turn up the radio.)

Well, this is one of those columns. I knew I felt another one coming on last week – right around Good Friday, to be specific. I had just finished a marvelous meal with a dear friend of mine at 'Yes, Thai Indeed.' We stopped on the way out to say hi to some folks, and told them we were off to the Baptist Church to hear their choir perform "The Seven Last Words of Christ." In the parking lot, my dinner companion, a former New Yorker with degrees from Amherst, Harvard *and*

Yale, confided, "I love living here! You can just tell people, straight up, that you're going to the Baptist Church to hear some music, and they don't look at you like you're crazy."

Not only that, I thought, but you can get great Thai food, too!

Really, Beaufort is something else, isn't it? Plenty sophisticated, yet blessedly old-fashioned. I'm not sure how, exactly, but we seem to have found the magic formula for living in the past, present and future, all at once. Our splendid antebellum houses aren't just tourist attractions and movie sets; they're *homes* – people actually live in them! Our historic churches aren't just quaint, crumbling artifacts; they have large, active congregations worshipping in their sanctuaries each Sunday. The stately old bank building on Bay Street looks exactly like a stately old bank building... until you step inside to find it's a hip, nouvelle Italian restaurant.

In Beaufort, progress comes... but never at the expense of what's best about our past. Here, history isn't something that happened a long time ago; it's something that's still *happening*. We celebrate the traditions of our ancestors even as we open our hearts and minds to new ways of seeing and being. I

*love*

that!

I love that I can see a production of the 'Vagina Monologues' on Friday, catch a rock band downtown on Saturday, then hear a choir perform Handel on Sunday. I love that we have a symphony orchestra, a couple of blue grass bands, and the Hallelujah Singers. I love that I can take a class in New Age Spirituality at TCL *and* hear a lecture by a renowned orthodox Anglican bishop at USCB. I love it that the Beaufort Yacht Club is still a weekly dinner destination for the guys, that some of my girlfriends are in the Junior Service League ... and that we now have something called Fuse 843 for "creative professionals." I love it that the arts community and the military community – two of our most vibrant forces – regularly mix and mingle... that the business community cares about the environment, and the environmentalists aren't "anti-business"... that we have a cool new film festival and a great, old-timey water festival...

I was in Asheville a couple of months ago, and I remember thinking how fantastic it was – the restaurants, the galleries, the bookstores, etc – but also feeling a little beset by the pervasive sense of the city's politics. There were slogan-bearing tee-shirts, signs and bumper stickers everywhere (including the walls and windows of businesses) that made it clear, in no subtle terms, that this was a certain kind of town... a "progressive" town. In my youth, I'd have probably found that exhilarating – that sense of radical solidarity. Now, I find it a little off-putting. Even if I were as progressive as most Ashevilleans, I think I'd find it off-putting. I just prefer a place where politics isn't front and center... where there's no group statement being made beyond "*welcome*."

You can walk the streets of Beaufort and never think twice about its politics. It just wouldn't enter your mind. (Unless, of course, it's election season, in which case you'll find campaign posters of all persuasions, usually side by side.) It's so *refreshing*. In a country that seems hell-bent on dividing itself into two adversarial halves – conservative and progressive – Beaufort is stubbornly, unapologetically, both. And neither. I

*love*

that!

Maybe Asheville (and its conservative counterpart) is where we're headed. Maybe we will finally succeed in dividing ourselves into "us" and "them" literally (i.e. geographically), the way we have

figuratively. Maybe in the future, we will all live in places where everybody is just like us... where everybody shares one inflexible point of view and one pristine set of values. Already, there are "intentional communities" springing up all over, and the "coastal urbanite" vs. "middle American" gap seems as wide as ever.

It certainly might make life easier, and a lot less messy – this picking and choosing of our neighbors. In fact, it might make life quite pleasant. But is "pleasant" really what it's all about? How much richer an experience – how much nobler an endeavor – to tax ourselves with following the commandment at the heart of every world religion: Love thy neighbor as thyself. I don't think Jesus was talking about "thy neighbor" with the tasteful house, or "thy neighbor" with the great sense of humor, or "thy neighbor" with the right politics. Those neighbors are easy to love; no commandment necessary. No, I think this teaching is uniquely profound and powerful because – and only because – it makes no such qualifications. None. There's absolutely no wiggle room. No caveats nor codicils. Just a commandment to "love the one you're with." Isn't that breathtaking? It blows my mind with its bold simplicity. Who among us is brave enough – daring enough – to *really* try it?

It seems to me that when – and only when – we turn ourselves to *that* experiment will we be truly progressive. And as of now, Beaufort's as good a laboratory as I've seen anywhere.

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