A year ago, I was sitting on a rickety front porch in a place known as Holler number five, surrounded by some of the kindest, sweetest people I’ll ever meet, who welcomed me and my husband into their lives with open arms. For two years, I lived and worked as a teacher in one of the poorest counties in the United States—McDowell County, West Virginia. Life is extremely difficult in this rural, abandoned, coal country community. It was for us during our time there, and it has been for lifelong residents for many generations. Although I’ve moved back to New England, and it’s been 11 months since then, it still sometimes feels surreal to be here in Boston—a place that has got to be as close to a polar opposite of the Holler if there ever was one.

Much has been made in the last year or so of the differences between people in rural America versus those in so-called coastal elite urban centers like Boston. The differences are many, and the culture shock was very real as I adapted from a life spent in the northeast to one in rural Appalachia, which seems to still be a few decades behind the times, for better or worse. I experienced a second round of culture shock coming back a few years later, reintegrating into modern life, and going to grad school full time this year here in the city. But, for all the ways that we’re different, there are also many ways that we’re the same.

First, people are good and want to be there for each other. When we first moved into our little West Virginia home, squished in next to 30 or so other homes in the hollow between two steep and lush tree-covered mountains, our neighbors brought us vegetables from their gardens, cakes baked in their kitchens, and invited us to drink iced tea with them on their porches. Here in Boston, I’ve seen this essential goodness studying alongside talented fellow teachers and accomplished, principled professors. I’ve seen incredible dedication and commitment to equity for children in classrooms across the country and the world, and a willingness to sacrifice and work tirelessly to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to succeed.

Secondly, people are complicated and they cannot be reduced to any single stereotype or label. It’s very easy from here to write off the West Virginia contingent as an ignorant, narrow-minded monolith. But I can tell you from direct experience that this is not the case. Conversely, it is also easy to assume that all of us Yankees are cold, self-centered, and unfriendly—stereotypes that I heard from West Virginia friends that are similarly untrue. The truth is, there is no one label that can possibly encapsulate all of the beauty and joy and pain of a person’s life. Everybody has a story, and we should acknowledge the complexity of those individual stories in every person we meet.

Most importantly, we all have the same amount of God in us, regardless of where we came from, what we’ve done, or where we’re going. Looking below the surface, finding the essential goodness, and practicing love over suspicion, mercy over judgment, these are the things I believe in.
In the collision of the two disparate worlds I’ve inhabited over the last few years, I’ve learned that the thing we need most ourselves, and the thing others need most from us, is simply this: grace. In the face of all that separates, this common thread unites, and that unity and connection are always worth pursuing.