I often describe my activities as parochial. When I use this word, what I mean to convey is that what I do is hyper-local—parochial in a place-based, village sense of the word. These connotations, however, aren’t always shared, and without clear explication, I am met with questions. In our current culture, parochial carries a negative connotation. When I look up the word in my dictionary, I find definitions like limited, of narrow scope, of or relating to a church parish. Yes to limited, I say to myself. Yes to a narrow scope. Why, I wonder, is this way of engaging with the world seen as negative? As for the church, I hold my immediate surroundings as sacred. Though it is imperfect, my practice is one of reverence, respect, and kindness. Having lived here only a short while, what do I know? I must take time to observe, I tell myself. Others have lived here much longer than I. Observe. Make inquiries. Be patient.

After reading Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax* my sense of the parochial was once again stirred. So, I searched for the etymology of the word, suddenly curious why I had not done it before. I found that parochial comes from the Greek, *paraikia*, meaning: “temporary residence in a foreign land, a stranger.”¹ What? Early Christian settlers called themselves parochial. Places where they established colonies were deemed temporary and heaven was considered home. Though they saw themselves as strangers, their practice of erecting walled villages, led *parochia* in late Latin to be designated as a term for any group of Christian settlers under the leadership of one pastor—what became known as a parish by the 14th century.

This etymological knowledge endears me even more to my sense of being parochial. I am a stranger here, in my home. Instead of colonizing— that has already happened where I live²—I attempt to learn from the indigenous beings of this place.

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¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary.
² I rent the oldest settler home in my region, built by Coast Miwok slave labor.
Sadly, the Coast Miwok, who lived here for thousands of years before they were decimated and displaced by the colonizing forces of New Spain, are not present. Without humans to turn to for stories, I take to the land.

While out in the oak woodlands, beyond the immediate vista of my front porch, I encounter elaborate huts, magical sculptural structures. I learn that these tangled wooden pyramids represent the homes of dusky-footed woodrats. I learn that the woodrats have been here for thousands of years, living simply, taking only what they need — twigs, berries, and leaves for housing as well as sustenance. I learn that they live communally, they are matriarchal, and that their three-foot high, five-foot-wide pyramid-shaped homes are as impressive inside as out, with cozy sleeping quarters, a climate-controlled pantry, a latrine area, a living room, and a nursery.³

There are so many woodrat domiciles out beyond my home, in fact, I begin to see it for what it is: a woodrat village, a parish of sorts. As I spend more time in this village — always during the day, which means I never actually see a woodrat, as they are nocturnal — I realize that as much as the woodrats use the underbrush to create their homes, they cannot clear it of invasive species. So I do my part. I clear the cotoneaster, an extreme fire danger, that is overwhelming the oak woodlands. In the process, I realize I have destroyed a woodrat dwelling. I quietly apologize. I create my own branch and twig-laden sculpture nearby, away from the newly cleared stand of live oak.

Several months later, while sitting under the live oak near my sculpture, I notice it has shifted in form. I behold the signature pyramidal shape of the woodrat style of homemaking, sticking out from my solid base of branches and ornamental shells placed here and there by my son and his friends. A couple of the larger shells are missing, and I wonder if it is the displaced woodrat who has craftily created a new deluxe residence within my prunings? I thought our sculpture was quite beautiful and now I find it even more enchanting, knowing that it is home to my newest teacher. I wish I could look inside and see how she is using the shells. I am quiet again. I honor

³ *Secrets of the Oak Woodlands* by Kate Merionchild
her ingenuity. I honor her lifetime of knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation. Live simply. No words needed — her message is clear.

Live simply.

We are all strangers in some way or another, and we are all connected. What might we learn if we engage with our immediate sphere, the world right outside our door, with an openness to all the strangers we encounter? How do we go from stranger to village friend? We must stay tuned in, we must slow down, we must observe and be available to the varied frequencies that are present.

Upon the completion of this essay, I will head out to tend to our oak land parish, and I will work in harmony with my dusky-footed village cohabitant. We may not know each other by name but we have kinship through our shared care of this place we know as home.