Experiencing the Landscape
Activities to inspire an embodied experience of the Cache Creek Nature Preserve

By Karl Frost

The Restore/Restory project tells the cultural history of the Cache Creek Nature Preserve as a way to experience the landscape. As a theater artist, my own work focuses on how we experience the world through our bodies, and so I offer these video exercises as my artistic contribution to the project. Whether you are just glancing at the videos or you are inspired to try them out yourself using the handouts below, I hope that they facilitate a more visceral sense of the landscape where the project takes place and that you can carry that visceral experience with you as you explore the human history of Cache Creek or even become a part of it as a visitor to the Nature Preserve.

While at the Nature Preserve, please pay attention to basic outdoor safety and be mindful of protocols set up by the Cache Creek Conservancy, the organization that manages the site. You can find protocols and a few notes on avoidance of poison oak, snakes, and ticks at the end of this article.

The three videos are condensed versions of longer exercises. I describe each as if it is a 30-minute exercise, but really they can be as long as you like, and I have done each of them for a few hours at a time and still felt that I had not reached the bottom of what they have to offer. Perception of time can shift during these kinds of exercises, and a half hour can seem like just a few minutes.

The three exercises are

• **Blind Walk** - In partners, moving quietly through the landscape without talking. One partner has their eyes closed and the other has their eyes open.
• **Slow Walk** - Pick a direction and walk very, very slowly in that direction for half an hour in silence
• **Sensory Exploration** – Begin walking very slowly in a direction. Notice sensations: sounds, textures, the visual, the tactile. Allow yourself to get distracted by the sensations and investigate the senses through interacting physically with the landscape.

They are each fairly simple and straightforward. It is this simplicity which gives them their power for opening up the senses and facilitating an awareness of body and the body’s relationship to the land. I’ve introduced them to many different groups, including actors, nature enthusiasts, and school children, and they are in my file of ‘tried and true’ exercises that always seem to generate something interesting and useful.

In the following, I give a basic description/script for the exercises and end with some general notes. The exercises can be done alone or with a partner, but are especially nice to do in small groups. If facilitating a group, you might want to describe the exercise first to the group, talk them through the first 5 or 6 minutes as they are doing it, and then let them go on their own for the rest of the time. Feel it out with your group.
Blind Walk

With your partner, find a comfortable place to stand for a bit. One partner will have their eyes closed, the other open. You will spend the next half hour without words.

For the first few minutes, simply stand together in stillness.

Allow your inner world to slow down through listening to the sounds around you, to the sound of your breath. Feel the air, the speed and direction of the wind, the temperature. Feel your feet on the ground.

As you are ready, the partner with eyes open takes the hand of the partner with closed eyes and suggests a direction to walk. Keeping your eyes closed, follow this cue and begin to move with your partner through the landscape.

Neither partner is exactly leading or following, although the partner with eyes open tries to make sure that the eyes-closed partner avoids dangers like falls or poison oak. Keep communication non-verbal. Move slowly through the landscape.

As your eyes are closed, keep physical contact with your partner. You can read the landscape through your partner and sense when your partner wants you to be aware of something.

As your eyes are closed, what do your other senses give you, what awareness opens up?

As your eyes are open, what do you become aware of and see in the silence, this space without words.

What are the sounds closer to you, farther from you?

How does the landscape shape sound? How do things feel as you come into contact? Feel free to investigate through touch.

Take your time. Follow your curiosity.

There is no rush.

How does your sense of time change as you listen to the land? How does your sense of yourself change?

After an half hour, pause and take a few moments to write in your journal or talk with your partner about the experience, then switch roles and do it again.
Slow Walk

Begin standing in silence for a few minutes. Feel your feet on the ground. Notice how your hearing opens up and more visual detail comes to you in this relative stillness without words. Feel the wind on your skin.

After a few minutes, begin to walk in a specific direction, very, very slowly. Together, everyone is going to move in the same direction… perhaps up stream, perhaps down a trail or through some trees. Everyone will be moving in their own version of ‘slowly’, but all in the same direction, and in silence for half an hour.

Feel your body as you walk: the relationship to gravity, the coordination of walking, the shifting of weight from one foot to the other. There is no rush to get there. You are investigating the journey and not the destination.

As you move slowly, you have the opportunity to feel the details of the ground you are walking over, the slight inclines and declines, the texture of the ground. You can hear your feet as they move the soil, rocks, leaves, or sand under your feet.

What do you see as you slow down without an urgency to get somewhere? Things that your eyes might pass over, you now have time to see and really notice detail.

Your path has a clear direction, but if you want to drift a bit in order to follow something you see, to examine something you are passing in more detail, or to reframe what you are seeing, feel free. Give yourself permission to pause and look and to take detours on your journey.

What do you hear in this time without words? How does the lack of words affect your senses?

There is no rush.

Follow your curiosity.

At the end of the half hour, find a stillness again for a few minutes and just notice what you sense.

As you are ready, come together to share details from your experiences, what you noticed, where your mind went and what you thought. Perhaps take some notes in your journal about the experience.
Sensory Exploration

Begin standing in silence for a few minutes. Feel your feet on the ground. Hear what you hear when talking stops. Feel the air. Notice what draws your attention visually.

Begin to walk together very slowly in a direction. Perhaps up a trail, downstream, across some gravel. You have a direction of movement that you all share, but everyone moves in their own variation of slow.

As you walk, notice sensation. In the slowness and lack of words, notice what you see, feel, hear, smell. Notice how your senses change, the flow of your attention and thoughts. The slowness is an invitation to relax, to sense detail.

What details draw your attention? Is it something you see in the distance, some plant that you brush against, the texture of the ground under your feet, the feel of the air on your cheek, the smell of the soil?

Follow the sensations and let yourself get distracted from your original goal and direction. You can always come back to it if you like.

Follow sensations. Reorient your cheek so that you feel the wind differently. Play with your feet on the ground, exploring the texture, or even get down on the ground and feel it with your hands or other parts of your body. Move in the direction of something that you are hearing or change your position so you hear it differently. Close your eyes or open them again. Move closer to something you see or change your view by moving away from it, or moving down below it or above it, as if you were creating a film with your eyes.

Don't be afraid to get down on the ground or to touch your face to a tree. Your actions can be quite mundane, but also feel free to enjoy the permission to do something more unusual. You are under no obligation to do anything specific. Let yourself get lost in sensation.

Allow each sensation to generate a response in the body, playing with that sensation. Each movement brings new sensations, new awareness of your body in this place. Stay with what you are doing, or follow the next sensation, as you like. There is no right or wrong. Follow your curiosity and notice what happens. Where does your mind go as you explore the landscape?

There is no rush. Feel permission to stay still. This is about the journey, not the destination.

At the end of the half hour, find a stillness again for a few minutes. As you are ready, come together to share with each other details from your experiences, what you noticed, where your mind went. Perhaps write in your journal about the experience.
General Notes on the Exercises

The following are a few notes for doing these exercises, whether you are doing them yourself or facilitating a group.

First, a note from the Cache Creek Conservancy…
We want our visitors to enjoy their time at the Nature Preserve. We ask that you follow these guidelines for your safety and for the safety and protection of the habitat.

- Please stay on the trails
- No smoking and no fires allowed on the grounds
- No dogs or horses allowed
- No firearms on the premises
- No recreational games such as paintball games, air guns, etc.
- No fishing, swimming or boating in the wetlands
- No feeding of any animals by the public
- No off-highway vehicles, bicycles, motorcycles, etc. outside of the parking lot
- No overnight camping
- No gathering of any materials without prior approval (seeds, cuttings, wood, etc.)

Patience and Permission
These exercises are meant to take time. Don’t feel rushed to do something. Give yourself permission to just be, to listen and feel, and to relax. Stillness is fine. Sensation, thought, and experience still continue moving when the body is in stillness. Allow things to come in their own time and don’t feel a pressure to have to do something. At the same time, give yourself permission to do things. You aren’t waiting for anything specific. Permission should be the guiding principle, rather than a sense of ‘should’. Even if stillness turns the exercise into a half hour nap, your body probably needed it, and it will likely be an interesting nap.

Investigating the Senses
Some people are not exactly sure what to make of this phrase, “investigating the senses”. It is open ended and is really about following your own curiosity, what grabs your attention. It could mean just being and letting sensation happen, just observing it. It could mean changing the sensation. With sound, it might mean reorienting to hear it differently. With vision, it might mean moving toward or away from that which is seen to get a different view or perhaps getting lower or higher or shifting how foreground and background relate in the field of vision, as if the eyes were like a film camera. With touch, it might mean giving oneself permission to touch things, feel them with different parts of the body, with more or less pressure. It is an open ended idea, a poetic invitation if you will, to gently play and explore.

Talking and Silence
Each of the exercises is intended to be done in silence, and this should be emphasized. Time in nature has the possibility of offering a shift in how we perceive ourselves and the world, but we often bring our ordinary self with us when we talk and stay in the social. It can be an unconscious avoidance of the unfamiliar. If instead, we let go of talking for a few minutes, we can start to feel a shift, feel our senses in a bit more detail.
Particularly if working with children, it is good to emphasize the active nature of listening... we are silent so that we can listen to the landscape. Often times, silence is seen as a form of punishment or arbitrary discipline, and if you can, it is good to emphasize what the silence is creating space for and that the lack of words is a creative act in and of itself.

Getting dirty
It’s good to come in clothes that you don’t mind getting dirty, and it is good to give yourself permission to get dirty. We often carry with us unconscious or conscious fears of getting dirty, but the dirt here is good, clean dirt, and there is a lot of fun and sensory delight to be had if we let ourselves interact with it directly. A little ritual that I often do with groups when I take them outdoors for exercises is to take a handful of the dirt and rub my hands in it and then rub it on my clothes, just to get that first moment of getting dirty out of the way. Sometimes I have the group just lay down on the ground and relax for a few moments to give ourselves that sense of permission in our bodies to interact with the earth.

“No Impact”
Whenever doing creative work out in nature, I try to minimize my impact. Considering the impact that we have as we move through the landscape can become a meditation on the nature of the web of life. How long does this plant take to grow? What can tolerate a more strenuous interaction, and what is more delicate? How did the pebbles on the bank of the stream get shaped this way? With each thing that we interact with, we can simultaneously investigate from our immediate senses and from our minds, thinking about ecological connections and the changing forces of the weather. This can itself make for an interesting conversation amongst participants.

Safety
Just as city life has its hazards, so does nature. In the case of the Cache Creek Nature Preserve, the most important to remember are rattlesnakes, poison oak, and ticks, though it is also good to keep in mind possible falls when we work with our eyes closed and to be aware of thorns. Make sure that everyone is well aware of these issues before proceeding with exercises... sometimes as we get a little giddy being outdoors we forget about precautions for things we don’t have to think about in town.

Poison Oak – make sure everyone knows how to identify it. If it is a season where there are no leaves, make sure that everyone can identify it from the stem, which still contains the irritant oils. If in doubt, don’t touch. If you or someone else may have touched it, don’t panic. Wash dirty clothes in cold water and wash the skin with cold water and soap. It’s good to go online and find some pictures that everyone can see and to identify it outdoors.

Rattlesnakes – remember that they are very much disinclined to interact with us, As long as we don’t surprise them, they will generally move away as soon as they notice us. To make sure that we don’t surprise them, it’s a good idea to scout an area that you want to explore in first, to make sure it is clear of snakes. As you are proceeding with the exercises, look where you are going and don’t run and jump or reach to someplace that you can’t see first. These exercises are done slowly, so this should not be a problem, though with the blind walk, the person who has their eyes open will want to keep an extra eye out for snakes. In case of an encounter, just back off ... remember, they are as afraid of you as you are of them, and they will go away if they notice you, possibly with a rattle requesting that you keep your distance. In the rare circumstance that there is a bite, don’t panic. Seek prompt medical help. Most of the time, they do not inject venom. In the case that they do, you will still have time to get to a hospital.
Ticks – as you move through taller grass or brush against bushes, it is possible you will encounter these little creatures which are mainly active late October through early March. They are quite tiny, about half a centimeter wide, and slow moving. Usually they will cling onto your clothes and start climbing until they get somewhere comfortable and then bite, a process which could take a few hours. It is best to check each other thoroughly for ticks after wandering around the Nature Preserve. It is possible to catch Lymes disease from ticks, but only if they bite and are left in place. If removed within 24 hours there is minimal chance of transmission, and even after 48 hours, transmission only rises to 10%. If you find a tick attached to yourself or someone, use tweezers to grasp the tick close to the skin, and steadily pull up. Wash your hands and apply some antiseptic to the spot of the bite. An immediate skin reaction is normal. If symptoms appear, see a physician for treatment.

For more information on ticks, rattle snakes, and ticks, Wikipedia has great entries, and there are many other online resources.