For centuries, the Northern Ojibway have been telling stories as a way to keep a record of what has happened in the past. This oral history has been preserved by the Elders, one story at a time, often taking the listener deep into the past to collect Great Medicine to use in the future. The Elders of the present day, say that right now we are in a story, and that future generations will be sitting around a fire telling our current story of how the ‘Two Legged’ lost their way and tried desperately to destroy the Earth. They state that we are in desperate times and that we are the Authors of this Story.

Here is such a story that has been preserved in the oral tradition, and was told by Isaac Murdoch on Nov 27, 2014 at the Native Canadian Friendship Center in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. It was generously recorded and transcribed by Christi Belcourt.
The land has something to give us. It has a voice and we hear it, every time the wind blows. We hear that voice when we hear that water smashing against those rocks. It’s telling us something. The voice of the land is great medicine for us and it’s everywhere; it surrounds us. Our people are great philosophers. They understand, and hear the great voice that comes from the land. That voice is still out there. It will still tell us the stories of what happened if we take the time to learn.

The stories contain the natural laws by which we human beings need to remember and follow in order to keep everything in balance. ‘Balance’ is one of the cornerstones within all Indigenous philosophies. We know, as our Elders still tell us, there is a great responsibility each generation has in maintaining this balance, and the severe consequences to all of life on the planet when we don’t.

Here is a story that shares with us about respect and balance.

"Offerings and Prayers for Genebek Ziibiing" by Christi Belcourt
Years ago, the Anishinaabe migrated from east to west, from waabinong, all the way to where we are now. We were following a very sacred path called Waabano Miikaan. It’s the same path that the sun follows, going from east to west. We were instructed many times, by many different beings, to remain on that path.

Before the migration, something happened that changed everything. Something happened so profound that it almost wiped off the two-legged (humans) from the Earth.

You know, we have our wiigwaam doors facing east, and there is a reason for that. It’s because the sun rises in the east and when it rises, the light comes into our lodges, giving us life. We believe our children need that light to live and thrive. Waabano Miikaan is that sacred path from east to west that the medicine people still speak about. Animals follow this path, and we were instructed to follow the animal trails so we could remain on this path.

Well, a long time ago the Anishinaabe stopped following this sacred path. They got greedy. The Anishinaabe wanted to have their lodge another way. They started to believe that the great medicine that bursts from animal footprints wasn’t good enough. They wanted to make their own trails. And so that is what they did. They made their own trails.

They started living life, not like a four-legged, but like a two-legged.

Everything went wrong at this point.

Not only did they become very greedy, but they began to disrespect everything. They would just walk along and bust branches when they were walking. They saw flowers and would just step on them for no reason. When they ate, they wasted everything.
Fat was just thrown out like it was nothing. They would let fish rot and the animals were very scared of them. The two-legged also became very mean with each other. They started to talk about each other and become violent. They became very war-like people, and the animals couldn’t stop them.

But, there was somebody watching all that was happening. Something that was bigger than the two legged. They were being watched from above giizhik, the sky. A spirit was up there, looking down at the two-legged and seeing how they were acting, and how they had forgotten to follow the path the four-legged had showed them.

This spirit’s name is Biboon’nini. He is the old man that lives way up in the universe, in the north. Biboon’nini saw what was happening and he thought to himself, ‘I’m going to destroy the two-legged for how they are acting.’ So he began to blow down onto Earth with his sacred breath and everything started to freeze.

But, there was a medicine here on Earth that was stronger than his breath, and it was the birds. When the birds sang their sacred songs it pushed his cold breath back. There is so much medicine in the bird’s songs that it pushed back Biboon’nini’s breath with great force. The old man knew that his power wasn’t as strong as those sacred songs the birds were singing.

So he thought of an idea.
He thought to himself, ‘I’m going to go down to earth and I’m going to collect all those birds and I’m going to tie them up in a great big bag. I’ll take them up to my wiigwaam in the stars. And then I’ll blow my breath.’ So, that is what he did. He collected all the birds and blew his ice cold breath.

The Earth became so lonely because the songs were gone. And let me tell you, the earth froze quick. That old man blew his sacred breath so hard that everything started to freeze and perish.

The Anishinaabek were already very weak because they had lost their way. They didn’t know what to do and became even more greedy, hoarding their food and being stingy. But the animals started to gather and have meetings. They started to pray and sing and ask for guidance and help. They were the ones that were putting their tobacco down when we couldn’t. And with their petition came great medicine.

At one of these meetings, it was decided that maybe nothing could be done. The animals all gave up except for one little animal, the Odjig, the Fisher. That little animal said “No, there is a way. We have to try to figure this out. We cannot give up.” Fisher put his tobacco down first and then spoke, “my little son at home told me that there is a way. My child told me that his blanket that he wrapped around him is not working and that he gets his strength and his warmth from the heartbeat of the land, and there is a way.”
Well of course when it was explained like that, they all knew that the message the little fisher gave was very pure and it held great medicine. They knew that they had to come up with a way to stop that old man from blowing his breath down on Earth.

So they too put their tobacco down and it was agreed upon that they were going to climb a high mountain. Once they were up on the mountain they would jump up from star to star and they would go into that old man’s wiigwaam, get those birds, sneak them out and bring them back to earth so that their voice, their medicine and the life they carry will save the people - both the four-legged, and the two-legged. They knew they had to go up there and try to negotiate with the old man. That was the plan and it was a good plan.

Every good plan starts with a sound. It starts from the black. Once the sound is made, it travels and it seeks the medicine that you are looking for. The animals know this and live by it.

So that is what they did. They sang their songs in order to find the courage and strength that they would need to go on their warrior’s quest to save the world.

Everything was frozen solid.
The old man never pitied the two-legged. He just kept blowing and blowing and blowing.

Four animals decided to go. The first animal that wanted to go was the Gaak, the Porcupine. A very unlikely hero when you think about it. Porcupine though, has a strong back and a strong heart.

The second animal that wanted to go was the Nigig, the Otter who is very fierce. He is a warrior and their medicine is strong. There are not too many things that can beat up an otter.

The other animal that chose to go was the Bizhiw, the Lynx. “I can do this,” he said “I have strong legs, I can jump high, and I’m quick.”

And of course the fourth animal was Odjig, the Great Fisher.

Those were the four that were chosen by the great mystery of this land to go up there to save the Earth, while the two legged began to perish.

When they got to the top of the mountain they felt strong. They knew everything was done correctly before hand. The tobacco was put down. The songs had been sung. The vision of that young person and heartbeat he talked about was in their minds.
They made a plan. They said, “We’ll grab Porcupine by his arms and legs and we’ll swing him then throw him up because he’s not a good jumper.”

So they did that. They threw him up, hard but when he went spiraling up there, he hit something. It was something that they couldn’t see.

There is a great power we can’t see but it is there. They couldn’t go through it. Porcupine just bounced right off of it and came shooting back down to Earth onto the mountain. When he landed, he landed on his back feet, and busted them and went rolling down the mountain.

That is why porcupines are like that today. They wobble. When you see them it’s like their back feet are busted, they are off to the side and are swollen. This is to remind us of that time when the two-legged became very greedy and wanted to rule the Earth.

The next one that wanted to do the jump was Otter, Nigig. Nigig took that big leap, and hard. And when Nigig jumped up, he too hit that power and came smashing down to Earth. And when Nigig hit the Earth, he landed on the side of the mountain and slid all the way down. That is why otters slide around like that today. It’s to remind us two-legged of what happened when we didn’t listen to our mother, the Earth.

The next animal was Bizhiw, the Lynx. Bizhiw is strong and quick. He is smart and he is a warrior. He thought, ‘we have to do this. We have to get through. If we don’t get through everything will perish.’ So Bizhiw jumped. Hard. When Bizhiw hit that Giizhik, he too came smashing back down to Earth. He hit it harder than the other two because he was desperate. He was desperate for all of the life to live that was on Earth. He was desperate to keep the heartbeat alive that we all carry.
When Bizhiw landed on that mountain, he landed on a sharp rock and he busted his tail off. That is why Bizhiw, the lynx today has a short tail and why he looks like his face is smashed in. It’s to remind us of what happened when the two-legged decided to follow their own path and disrespect everything.

The only one that was left up there all alone was Fisher, Odjig. He felt lonely and he felt defeated because his friends were gone. He felt like maybe he didn’t have the strength to do it because those other three were very strong warriors and he didn’t know what to do. All he thought about was his son. And when he thought about his son, he thought about the faith and hope his son carried. So he looked for something to give as an offering to the Great Spirit of this land as a petition for help to find the courage to do the right thing. He noticed six bear berries in the snow. He took those bear berries and gave them up as an offering and when he looked up, he saw something! He saw something that gave him all the hope in the world. He saw a crack in giizhik where the other animals hit. He knew that if he kept trying that he could bust his way through and he knew in that moment that he had to do this.

So he jumped. And he jumped again. And again. He didn’t stop jumping until he finally busted through.

When he got through, he looked to where that old man lived. There was a great big crane guarding the doorway of the old
man’s wiigwaam. A crane has a voice that can be heard for miles and they are loud!

If you have ever heard the shrilling voice of a crane there is a very good chance you will turn around and go the other way. So Fisher knew he had a big challenge in front of him.

So Fisher thought, ‘I need to go back down to where the trees are. I need to collect some spruce gum, gaawaandak-bigew. I need to grab spruce gum and sneak back up to where the crane is and shove it in his mouth. When I shove that spruce gum in his mouth maybe he won’t be able to make that loud noise if I jam it in there far enough.’

That was his plan and it was a good plan.

So that is what he did. He crawled down to Earth and he started to collect spruce gum. “Oh please! I need you!” he said to the tree. “I need to take some, I need to do this. I need your help. Please! I just need a little bit.” And he collected the spruce gum until he had a nice good handful of it and then went back up through that hole.

Once up there, he started to sneak from star to star to star. Finally, he was getting close to where the crane was. Everything had led up to this very moment. He knew ‘this was it.’
He charged for the wiigwaam and Crane saw him. As soon as Crane saw him, he opened up his great big mouth and just as he did Fisher rammed the spruce gum down his throat. But, just before it got all the way back, Crane made a little gawking noise, “ga!” That little sound was enough for the old man to start running for his arrows. The old man’s arrows are not like regular arrows. They were magic arrows. They could go to the end of the Earth to find their mark no problem.

Fisher charged into that wiigwaam, grabbed the birds and sped out. Quickly he started running with the birds back to where that hole in the giizhik was. He hadn’t run very far when he heard it. It was the snap of a bow. He knew the arrow was coming behind him and all he could think about was getting those birds down through that hole.

Now, the size of the hole and the size of the bag with all the birds were the same. He knew if he was going to get those birds down that hole, he wouldn’t be able to go down the hole himself. That made him run harder and faster. It made Fisher believe that he could do it.

When Fisher got to the hole, he grabbed the bag of birds and put it down into the hole as he just kept traveling over it. He didn’t have time to jump down. He kept running, and that’s when he got shot with the arrow.
He lay there with the arrow stuck in him and cried with great joy because he did it! He knew that the birds and the sacred songs that they carried was going to bring great medicine across the land. He knew there was still hope! He understood then, that part of his journey was to die for the people and that is exactly what he did.

Of course the old man was happy he killed Fisher because that was his greatest enemy at that time. Fisher had been greatest one yet to challenge him. The old man knew that all he had to do was just go back down to Earth, gather those birds back up in a bag, put them back in his wiigwaam and blow his sacred breath. Just like nothing had happened.

But when Fisher was dying up there, something did happen. When he gave his last breath, “haaaaaaaah”, that breath travelled seeking medicine. Just like our prayers and life keeps traveling long after we’re gone. His sacred breath carried a request that traveled exactly to where it needed to go.

There were six spirits that received his sacred petition that he gave with those six bear berries, and it was offered through his last breath. Those spirits had seen everything. At first, they didn’t intervene with what the old man was trying to do. Why would they? The two-legged
really destroyed everything. But after seeing the strong courage of Odjig, they pitied the four-legged. The six spirits came traveling to where that old man’s wiigwaam was. They sat with him and started to talk with him. Remember Fisher wanted to do that? He wanted to negotiate and talk with the old man.

Fisher's breath, his very last breath had really meant something.

Those six spirits that visited the old man in his lodge told him, “We respect what you’re trying to do. We respect that you are trying to cleanse the Earth of the two-legged for what they have done but what we have seen is an act of hope. What we’ve seen is great medicine being cast around the Earth and it means something. What we would like to see, is that you blow your breath for half the time because we believe what you are doing is true. We also want to let birds sing their sacred songs for the other half of the time because we believe in what they do too.”

Of course at that very instant, this is what became winter and summer as we now know it. In the springtime, when Mother Earth’s water breaks, those birds sound their sacred songs to the world and bring medicine to everything.

You’ll also notice a set of stars in the springtime. Those six spirits up there said, “to commemorate what Fisher did, to commemorate his heart, we are going to turn Fisher into stars”. So they turned Fisher into the Big Dipper. In the spring time you’ll see the Big Dipper upright, this represents life. When its upright, the water breaks. Water comes through the ‘sacred hoop,’ Bgonegiizhik - the hole in giizhik that the four-legged made so that life here could flourish. That sacred water comes and gives us life and the sound of life is then cast out into the world through our little ones.

“New Beginnings” by Christi Belcourt & Isaac Murdoch
Then in the fall, the Big Dipper goes upside down and blood will run from where the Fisher got shot from that arrow. The blood paints all of our trees red. Both in the spring and fall, the Big Dipper is to remind us of what happened when the two-legged lost their way.

When I think about that story, I think about now and truly believe that in the future, they are going to be talking about what happened right now and maybe us, the two-legged, have to be the ones to make that jump and reach for the stars. Maybe it’s the two legged that have to take that leap of faith. As two-legged, we have to find that trail again. We have to find that sacred path that goes from east to west. We have to find the great medicine that is bursting out of the foot prints of the four-legged. A lot of people will say what does that mean? To me, it means getting back to the land. It means learning our language. It means building those wiigwaams. The story now needs that more than ever. Our story now is depending on that. So I encourage you to take that leap. I encourage you to take that jump because we are in the story now.

Maybe the work that we do now doesn’t seem like it will mean anything. Maybe what we do now will seem like we are not accomplishing anything. But I’ll guarantee you, if it wasn’t for the strong back of Porcupine, the strong legs of Bizhiw the Lynx, and strong heart of Nigig the Otter, Fisher never would have made it through. Everything that we do now is going to matter in the future.

**Narrated by: Isaac Murdoch**  
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“Reviving Everything Anishinaabe” by Christi Belcourt