Restorying is not a new concept, but more like trying to describe the emerging recognition of a reality. That's what it means to me. Physically, people didn't leave, but there were times when people were led to believe that their story ended and they were to emerge a new person, as if from a cocoon. However, this transformation never happened.

There is a big gap in the story, an intrusion, an injection of assimilative thought, the residential experience. Many children were sent to these institutions, returning with less of self, and more of less identity. It was the beginning stage for the reluctant elders of the future, the beginning of the story that was in danger of being left behind.

It was a good thing that many traditional elders were still left, the youth in their time, mentored by Monfwi, the future tellers, such as the late elder, Alexis Arrowmaker. Alexis once told me a story,

When the boats came in the summer, many children were to be sent to the mission school. I wanted to go, but I was living under the roof of Chief Monfwi who had other ideas. Without telling him, I took my bedroll and went to the barge and sat there waiting for it to leave. Other people saw me sitting there and it was not long before Monfwi heard about me. He came and told me, that he will teach me everything I needed to know, and so I followed him home.

Chief Monfwi signed Treaty 11 in 1921, and we still recite his words, “As long as the sun rises, the river flows, and the land does not move, we would not be restricted from our way of life.” Monfwi’s intention was for people to retell the story and bring people back to remembering their past. Monfwi laid the foundation for us to build this new house, reminding us how we’re going to interact with the rest of the world. But there must be rules within that house, rules that we call a constitution, laying out how we treat each other, who is going to lead us, and how we’re going to live together. The land claim gave us the tools to build that foundation. When the concept of modern governance came, there was already a school of thought, a basic structure, with both leading to the same place. It's still fragile in its own way and there is fragility in almost everything, but there was strength in numbers, that's how people survived.

When I was looking at the map of our land, I didn’t think too much about this because people would always be here. Yes, they’re here but not many remember to tell the story anymore or even the beginning of that story. There are some that tell the stories, but they are few in numbers. It just means that we were strong in numbers before, and to be consistent in our way of thinking, it should be revived. People can get splintered in many directions and we need to be constantly aware of overloading the house with so much foreign material that we may not even recognize the foundation anymore.

Language and culture are like that, too. In our story of the landscape, the land itself, in very many places, is sacred, especially the Yamozha sites which are linked to events of the initial recorded history.¹ When you make an offering, if that offering is sincere, these sites hold knowledge for you and gift you to see a vision of the future. If you are sincere in your

¹ In stories told by Tłı̨chǫ elders, Yamozha is associated with a time when the landscape was being formed and relationships with the land and animals were being established by the people.
approach and make the offering with belief, the reward is your ability to see that vision for yourself. When you have the wisdom of an old person, you can see a lot further.

We are in a struggle to grow people to see what the future might hold, and not only that, enabling them to see how to interact with the future. We have one of those sites at Nishi and at least two or three on Marion Lake and we have more going up the river at many places. We need to visit these sacred sites more often, and it is these little rituals associated with them that add to the bigger picture.

That’s why the Trails of our Ancestors annual canoe trips become important. They bring us back into that environment. It takes a child at least thirteen years, ten months out of a year, to complete high school so as to learn to survive in the modern environment. However, we are only providing this traditional education for maybe ten days out of the year. When we look at the last sixteen years that we have offered this program, it’s only one hundred and sixty days. So over the last sixteen years, we’ve only really taken people out on the land for five months. It is not even equal to one year of learning. At least there’s still an interest in people going back and learning little bit, by little bit, by little bit. The ones that were youthful sixteen years ago are now the leaders of these groups, leading the new ones. And because they’re going to the traditional places, older people are whispering in their ears constantly about what they might see and it creates an interaction between the generations.

When we began our early journeys, elders told the Yamozha stories of long ago, which are about the co-existence of the people and animals in the early landscape. The next stage, which I call the Edzo era, was related to respect, not just towards our elders, but to other people as well. Then we get into the trade period, re-emphasizing collectivity where strength in numbers and having one voice became very important. When Monfwi spoke the words at the initial treaty of 1921 that led to the Tłı̨chǫ signing the modern treaty, he was a visionary for us. It’s not only other people recognizing your government, but our own people recognizing themselves as having the ability to make their own decisions. That’s probably the toughest part, trying to get away from dependencies. It has always seemed better for somebody else to make the decisions. Then we don’t have to have that responsibility, but that’s the story that we have become to believe. On the journey some old people would say about the many challenging issues, “Well, I don’t know where to put my head. Where do you put your head? To lay down here? Lay down there?”

What happened back in 1492 didn’t really affect us as a people until after 1670 when the Hudson’s Bay Company traders showed up in the North. Then it started to have an impact, and later on it created conflict. That’s where the refuge stage began in our story. In 1763 the Royal Proclamation recognized what was here before, giving us some recognition, and deciding that there had to be treaties of some sort in exchange for those lands. Then in the 1870s the Indian Act determined how people were going to be governed. Treaty Eleven was signed in 1921 and after that most of the residential schools started to affect our people. Before that they couldn’t really take our children because they weren’t wards yet, but once we became wards, then the federal government could assimilate us in that way. That’s why people don’t know where to put their heads, over here, over there. They are never comfortable either way. This is the story before recent negotiations for self-government. That’s what our Tłı̨chǫ governance is about: to have an influence on how that story is being told. We would have law-making authority, but other governments would still have their authority too. Our authorities meet in mid-stream without each giving away their identity.

The Tłı̨chǫ Community Services Agency (TCSA) Agreement is a good example of the meeting of these two authorities without taking over the other. At the same time, the mission of the TCSA is to see if the story can be retold, giving recognition to our other world of other people coming into contact with the Tłı̨chǫ.

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2 A program of the Tłı̨chǫ Government where elders and youth travel together on traditional trails.

3 Edzo was an historical Tłı̨chǫ leader who initiated peace with Akaitcho, after many years of conflict, opening up the reality of another world of other people coming into contact with the Tłı̨chǫ.

4 The refuge refers to a time when Tłı̨chǫ people fled from constant warfare with other tribes to a place of “refuge” deep within their traditional homeland.

5 A trilateral agreement as part of the Tłı̨chǫ Agreement process, which created an Agency to deliver education, health, and child and family services in the Tłı̨chǫ communities.
language, culture, and way of life. There are still two stories, which led to the idea of being “strong like two people,” combining the two without one giving up the other.\(^6\) It’s more about mutual recognition. Otherwise you must give up something and replace it with something else.

We’ve made so many big steps that we don’t really realize it until we step back and watch. The canoe journeys have come together all by themselves this year. This is the first year that all the elders from the region came in to talk about how the Trails of Our Ancestors was going to happen this year. I didn’t get involved and this means that it’s starting to run by itself and other people are taking responsibility. This is huge to me.

The IMBE summer program for youth is another form of this kind of activity.\(^7\) Last year people were asking many questions, but this year nobody’s asking any questions. The program is running by itself, it’s taken off and it’s actually attracting more people.

The Governments of Canada and the Northwest Territories are constantly transforming by selection, implementing party mentalities to cater to the global economy. Unfortunately, the wealth needed to be a player lies under the feet of Aboriginal people with their storied landscape. Instead of recognizing the governing authority of the people, established by a recognized agreement they are party to, they choose to continue railroad as they have done before there was an agreement. The story will always be under threat of alteration without consent. It is the beginning of a sad story once again, a retelling of disenfranchisement, the story of not co-existing, not respecting, puncture the collective, ignore rights, renege on agreements, and paint a different future.

Ours is a story that goes way back to the beginning of our time, back to a time of coexisting with the animals, storied into the landscape. The story itself is timeless. It follows us wherever we are. When we get a little bit older, we get into conflict with even our best friends. Over time, we start to re-spect one another. Then we get into the work force, trading labour or knowledge for money or for goods to put on the table. And then we start to represent ourselves a little bit more openly to represent our community. We share our collective stories that we have individually to keep it whole. When we get to recognition, people start to recognize us as somebody with knowledge. But it’s more important that you recognize yourself as the one with knowledge at the time. Your identity is what you know, knowledge that you can share in exchange for the labour of the young, to pass it on. It’s not an extension of the story from one to another, it’s the everyday life of each person, the lifespan of a person that is lived over and over, one after the other, but at different stages. In the end we’re taking that recognition a little bit further and going across the river, putting what we know in the river. When people say that land is life, it literally is life itself as we know it today. It’s really all about recognizing where we are, the recognition that your story is just your own story.

The whole point of the activities on the land is to get people to relive that story to some degree by action and interaction to fill that void so that they give recognition for themselves to really go beyond self, representing everybody in this new era to make sure we don’t lose it again. Even today, when you hear the ravens, when you see the wolverines and you see the caribou, the story is being told constantly. We still don’t hear ourselves because we don’t recognize that we had the ability to hear them before, when we were there, before being here. We were living that life, and the law of being in a collective with the animals is kind of ignored. It’s not a big long history, it’s an everyday thing. The way I have just told it is explaining it in a simplistic way. When I see the IMBE program, I can see that they’re really working it, there’s real recognition for it, even the elders are involved and they’re passionate. So I feel good about this year.

For more information on the Tłı̨chǫ Government, see www.tlicho.ca.

Dr. John B. Zoe was the chief land claims negotiator for the former Treaty 11 Council of the NWT, and is now a senior advisor to the Tłı̨chǫ Government.

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\(^6\) A quote from a respected Tłı̨chǫ elder, Elizabeth Mackenzie paraphrasing a vision of bicultural and bilingual education articulated by Chief Jimmy Bruntau for Tłı̨chǫ youth. Strong Like Two People became the vision of the Tłı̨chǫ Community Services Agency.

\(^7\) In 2011, the Tłı̨chǫ Government created an award-winning summer program for each Tłı̨chǫ community that connects children and elders in cultural programs.)
He has an Honourary Doctor of Laws from the University of Alberta. John has been instrumental in the development of programs for the new government involving elders and youth that are built upon a foundation of Tłı̨chǫ language, culture, and way of life.

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