



## The Emerald Lizard

*Guatemala*

Once upon a time there was a holy man who lived at the foot of a mountain range, among the Lord's innocent creatures and the poor of the region came to him with their tribulations. On a morning like this, a needy Indian approached him demanding to appease the hunger of his family. With a voice of heartfelt anguish he narrated his sorrows, asking for his help.

The good father, who owned nothing himself, because he gave everything away, was moved by so much misery and felt deeply saddened by not being able to alleviate it. So, moved and saddened, he began to implore Divine Grace. As he prayed he looked around him and his eyes fell on a lizard which was basking in the sun. He reached out his hand, taking it gently. On contact with this miraculous hand, the lizard changed into a jewel of gold and emeralds which the holy man gave to the poor Indian saying:

'Take this and go to the city. You'll get some money for it if you take it to a pawn shop.'

The Indian obeyed and, with what he had been given he could remedy his hunger and that of his family. In time he was able to buy a farm that later prospered. When his situation was comfortable years later, he thought that he should return the jewel, which had brought so much profit, to its rightful owner. So he got it out of the pawn shop, on a beautiful summer morning, and returned with it in search of the holy man. He found him in the same place of the first meeting, although he was much older and, if possible, poorer.

‘Dear father’, the Indian said to him. ‘I’m returning this jewel. You gave it to me once, and it has served me so well. I no longer need it, so take it. Perhaps you can help another with it. Thank you very much, and God bless you.’

The old man remembered nothing. Seemingly distracted, he took it and placed it gently on a boulder. Again, by the miracle of his hands, that precious object returned to what it had been before, a lizard, which then began to walk slowly in the direction of its cave. □

Adapted by Juan Burghi (1969).

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## Comments

The Uruguayan writer Juan Burghi (1899-1985) said, in 1969, just before writing this story: ‘a legend, which I read from Aztec lands, comes to my mind, but I don’t remember where. I called it “The Emerald Lizard”’. Not long after, in 1985, Anderson Imbert would write:

Burghi forgot the origin of his story (...) No, it is not from Aztec lands, but Mayan and the author of ‘The Emerald Lizard’ is the Guatemalan Carlos Samayoa Chinchilla (1898-1973). (1985, p. 55)

But, from there, it must be said that what Carlos Samayoa Chinchilla writes is not an original story, in other words, it does not come from his own creativity. It is an adaptation of an old story about the miracles of Brother Peter of Saint Joseph de Betancur (1626-1667), a Canarian Franciscan missionary, native of the Island of Tenerife, who would end up being canonised in 2002 and named patron of Guatemala and the Canary Islands.

Brother Peter, as he is still called in Guatemala, founded the first convalescent hospital and the first school open to all people (for children and adults) in the region. He was advanced for his time and, in his school, the students were not differentiated by sex or by race, and it was equally attended by boys and girls: Spanish, indigenous, black people and Mestizos. In fact, its innovative character is illustrated by the fact that, as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Brother Peter preferred to

use educational methods based on rewards and reinforcements, rather than punishments. This would continue in the education system of Western countries until beyond the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

As should be evident, in The Earth Stories Collection we critically analyse not only the invasion of the Americas by European powers, but also the proselytising effort of their priests and friars to convert indigenous people to Christianity and the European worldview. It must be taken into account that these peoples already had beliefs and worldviews which had many more systemic and ecocentric elements than those of the European culture. We have already evidenced this in the research that led to this Collection (Cutanda, 2016). However, we have had no objections to including, here, an account of this Catholic saint. This is due to the fact that, at least, his high degree of compassion led him to carry out impressive social work in caring for the most vulnerable people and those in need, something for which he is greatly remembered and which led the Catholic Church to appoint him as the patron of the homeless.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that Brother Peter was not a typical missionary of the ‘Conquest’ of America, because he has not a European ethnocentric mentality. Although he had Jean IV de Béthencourt –who began the conquest of the Canary Islands in 1401– among his forefathers, Pedro was rather a direct descendant of Guanches and Canaries, in other words, the aborigines of the islands of Tenerife and Gran Canaria respectively (Pedro de San José de Betancur, s.f.).

## Sources

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 9: Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

