The Leper Field

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It was described as a 400-acre, rough, hill farm. My dad traded their established 40-acre farm for the 400-acre farm in 1952. The neighbors warned them that they would starve but reluctantly, my mom finally agreed to the move. My dad quit his job at Purdue University to pursue his dream of farming. A wood burning stove, an outhouse, and no running water greeted them and their four small kids. We thought it was heaven.

That area of southwest Indiana was underlaid with limestone. We had an abandoned, small quarry that provided stone to build the original house and barn foundations in the 1800's. Limestone rocks from the quarry area were visible in every field after a rain. They were a nuisance for farming with tractors and modern farming equipment and had to be hand-cleared.

My dad selected one small, especially rock-filled field, as our Leper Field. That is where he took the four of us kids to hand clear the field. Proceeds from that special field were to go to people with leprosy. None of us understood the illness of leprosy or that it was nonexistent in southwest Indiana. I suspect he had seen lepers while in the South Pacific in WW II.

While we were working in the Leper Field, my dad would explain poverty and discrimination to us. He had experienced both growing up in Indianapolis as the child of immigrants from Slovenia. He explained that no matter how little we had, there was always someone who could use our help, like the lepers. He also implanted the belief that because of our Slovenian heritage, we were as good as anyone. The terms Slovenian supremacy and hybrid vigor were frequently used by him to describe us and undoubtedly contributed to our ego development.

Years later, the four of us confronted him about just how much money from the Leper Field had gone to lepers. He was vague about it, and no one raised the question again. More years later, while serving in the Peace Corps in Liberia, West Africa, I discovered a leper colony far in the interior of the country. I donated and purchased crafts made by the lepers. A stool shaped like an elephant carved by lepers from a palm log sits in my living room to this day.

At some point later in our lives, we reflect on the early influences that shaped our values and world view. For me, it happened as a child working with a wise farmer in a Leper Field on a rough, hill farm in Indiana.