

**THE REASONS THAT THIS WEBSITE EXISTS:  
A Father And A Childhood Remembered  
Why I Decided To Work With Angry, Controlling, And Abusive Men And Women**

Our world, in many ways, has become an angry and a dangerous place. We hear about disrespect, control, prejudice, hatred, abuse, and violence almost everywhere: in our homes, at our workplaces, on our freeways, in our schools, in our neighborhoods and communities, in our country, and in the world-at-large. There is just too much hurtful, disrespectful, punishing, and abusive anger all around us. But life does not have to be this way. These destructive attitudes and behaviors are, in fact, **NOT** the same thing as anger, that normal and natural human emotion which I will describe in great detail on this website. These attitudes and behaviors are, in reality, toxic distortions and perversions of anger and are not what anger the emotion is intended to be. I, as a child, was one of many people who received some very confusing and destructive messages about anger and how to deal with it. I will talk more about that later in this section as well.

Anger is a fact of life, a normal and natural human experience that everyone feels at times. No one will be able to eliminate anger from their individual lives or from our planet. Anger is simply a part of our humanness. Depending on how it is handled, anger can build self-confidence and self-esteem and enhance your relationships with others or it can create hurt, intimidation, fear, guilt, and shame. It can also destroy safety, trust, and emotional intimacy with those around us and can lead to the loss of the relationships that are most important to us in our lives. It all has to do with how you experience and express it. When expressions of anger become harsh, abrasive, punishing, shaming, vengeful, and abusive or when you begin to “stuff” your anger, withdraw from those who are close to you, and don’t express anger at all, you begin to take a toll on your own and others’ emotional, physical, relationship, and spiritual well-being. If you truly want to change this part of yourself, you first need to understand what anger is (and what it isn’t) and then learn more effective ways to handle your anger whenever it does arise. That is the goal of this website, [www.ANGEResources.com](http://www.ANGEResources.com).

I started to seriously think about and study these issues in the early 1980’s (although it had been an integral part of my life long before that). I began to write what has become this workbook in my spare moments during that period of time. At that point, I worked as a counselor at a domestic abuse program in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The writing of this material continued when I next worked at a community mental health center in the western suburbs of Minneapolis where I was directing a domestic violence program for men who had been abusive and for the women who had been abused by them. This writing project began as an effort to put down on paper what I had been saying to clients for a number of years about issues related to anger, shame, control, and abuse.

Some of what is here began as the curriculum for a long-term and comprehensive domestic abuse group treatment program for men that culminated in a book entitled *Stopping The Violence: A Group Model To Change Men’s Controlling and Abusive Attitudes and Behaviors*, published by Haworth Press in New York in 1999, a comprehensive guide for professionals who are working with the issue of domestic abuse. A companion piece, also published by Haworth in that same year was called *Stopping The Violence: The Client Workbook* and was used by clients in the 45-60 session domestic abuse group treatment program that I led for over 30 years in a variety of therapeutic settings. Since then, additions to

and revisions of this work have created an anger management workbook for both men and women. This workbook, *Embracing the Dark Side: Learning to Recognize and Transform the Anger Within and Around You*, is an attempt to reach out and assist both men and women who truly want to address and change the way that they experience and express the anger that they feel.

In total, I have worked in the mental health field since the early 1970's. Anger and abuse issues have been a strong interest, and even a passion, of mine since the mid-1980's. Since the 1970's, I have counseled individuals, couples, families, and groups in both community and university settings. I, along with a friend and colleague, Michael Obsatz, Ph.D., began developing this website in 2000 (completely updated and revised in 2017) which includes a great deal of information about anger, abuse, stress, shame, control, effective communication and conflict resolution, healthy relationships and other related topics.

I have presented hundreds of workshops and seminars to both community groups and professional audiences in this immediate area and as far away as a five and one-half day presentation that I gave in Hong Kong in China. I have assisted mental health agencies, grass roots organizations, and individuals in developing their own domestic abuse and anger management programs and these ideas and strategies have been used all over the United States and in other parts of the world as well. In addition, the ideas and strategies in this workbook have been used by female colleagues for years in anger classes and workshops specifically designed for women and in domestic abuse programs for women who are survivors of domestic abuse in their relationships with their partners. Finally, I have written and self-published several other anger workbooks to accompany the client work that I do and the workshops that I have presented and I have authored scores of articles for a variety of publications and for my website on anger and numerous other mental health topics. Since the 1980's, I have had the good fortune to touch the lives of thousands of people with the concepts presented here. I hope to touch thousands more with this workbook, which serves as the culmination of my study since I began working in the mental health field.

But this workbook is not just about my educational background and my professional experiences. It is also about my own very personal life journey. And, not surprisingly, my story has a number of very clear similarities to a great many of the clients with whom I have worked over the years.

I grew up in an angry family. Or, to be a bit more precise, I grew up with an angry, hostile, and shaming father, who made my life as a child very difficult and whose imprint on me is still a part of the way that I look at the world and function as I go through my daily life.

My father was a distinguished physician in Obstetrics and Gynecology at an unrivaled medical institution during my childhood. He was a recognized leader in his field who traveled, consulted, and spoke all over the world. He eventually became head of that department in 1969. He was actively involved in both church and community affairs. He was a brilliant and gifted man who read voraciously at any opportunity. His colleagues trusted and respected him. He delivered thousands of healthy babies. He worked tirelessly and with great empathy and compassion to battle a myriad of women's life-threatening illnesses. His patients were awed by him and many probably "loved" him as well (doctors were still considered to be "gods" back in the 1950's and 1960's).

I actually heard these sorts of sentiments expressed very directly to me by some of his patients years later when I was teaching swimming and tennis to their children through the local YMCA and our city's recreation department. He, from everyone's accounts, was a compassionate and caring man,

supremely dedicated to medicine, to the patients with whom he worked, and to the community in which he lived. The mothers of these children I taught often commented about how lucky I was to have such a wonderful man for a father. Who could ask for anything more from a dad and a role model? But they really didn't know my father the way that I did. They hadn't lived and grown up with him.

Sadly, for me and my siblings, there was another very different side to this man who was so highly esteemed in so very many circles in our community, in the country, and in the world-at-large. With all his energy and devotion seemingly going to his work delivering babies and treating women's life-threatening diseases and to his church and community activities, there really didn't seem to be a great deal of time, energy, or emotion left over for us as his children. From my perspective as a child, my father did not seem to like me or the other children in his own family all that much.

For years, I wondered why he had become who he was and why he treated me (and my siblings) the way he did. And there were, in fact, many possible reasons for his attitudes and behaviors in looking back at the life that he lived.

Maybe it was his own childhood, being raised by two dour and depressed parents in Pittsford, New York, who seemed to have little joy for the process of living. Even the house where they lived seemed "dark" and foreboding to me in many ways whenever we visited there during my childhood (even though, for much of my life, I have lived in a 1908 house and I love the woodwork and architecture of older homes). His interactions with his parents when he was a child may have been a part of what led to his own feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and the "hidden depression" that he never really seemed willing to address or overcome. He shared with me, near the end of his life, that he had always desperately sought the approval of his father, a high school industrial arts teacher, a minor league baseball player when he was a young man, and a gifted artisan who handcrafted remarkable mission oak furniture and lighting fixtures in addition to producing beautiful paintings and drawings. But my father believed, to the end, that he had never really experienced that approval, even after he rose to become the successful and respected physician that he became. As a young adult, he actually tried to talk to his mother about wanting to be closer to his father. The response he received from her, her voice dripping with disdain, was "*Well, I pity you,*" a powerful message to him about the "importance" of what he felt and was trying to communicate with her in that moment. My father also had one sister, who appeared to be as dour and depressed as her parents. For some unknown reason, she and my father had a "falling-out" at one point in their lives and did not speak to each other for many years which, in looking back, simply provided more information about the family from which he came.

Another possible reason that he acted the way he did was his experiences as a battalion surgeon in the South Pacific during World War II, where he was confronted on a daily basis by the ravages of sickness, injury, mutilation, and death all around him. It was also during this time that he himself contracted hepatitis, malaria, and dengue fever, which left him feeling vulnerable, weak, alone, and miserable.

Maybe his difficulty with his children involved the long hours at all times of the day and night when he worked as a dedicated and accomplished physician addressing "life and death" situations which undoubtedly created stress, frustration, and impatience with things at in his family that did not happen the way he wanted or expected them to go on the home front.

Perhaps it was that “godlike” status he assumed in the community and in his professional endeavors and his frustration that his children never seemed to view and treat (i.e. perhaps “worship”) him in the same way that others did and in the way that he felt we should have as well.

It also could have been related to the fact that his children were never quite able to live up to the standard that he himself had set and achieved as a child and young adult. He was called “the little professor” by his parents due to his serious, studious, and “adult-like” nature even as a small boy. He attended a prestigious college and an unrivaled medical school. He advanced to the top of his profession due to his intelligence, his diligence, and his hard work.

Or, finally, who he was might have been related to his mother’s bitter accusation toward him in 1958 around the time of his father’s death which seemed to me, in looking back, to be an absolutely crucial “turning point” in his life and how he looked at himself and the world around him (and consequently his own children). His father was struggling with throat cancer at the time. My father had concurred with physicians at the medical institution where he practiced that surgery was the only available option for his father. His father died on the operating table. In his sorrow, he sought to connect and grieve with his mother immediately after his father’s death. His mother, probably overcome by her own grief at the loss of her husband (but also due to who she was as that negative and depressed person), rebuffed him harshly, telling him that he had “killed” his father because he had agreed with his colleagues who recommended surgery as the only available option. Then she turned away from him, never really connecting with him about this significant and traumatic event in both their lives. This rejection and abandonment by her at this time undoubtedly created and reinforced the insecurity, self-doubt, and emotional scars he already carried with him from his earlier life. Truly being able to connect with his mother at that pivotal point in his life journey might have made a dramatic difference in the life he eventually lived, how he thought about himself, and how he viewed and treated his wife and his own four children.

But, in any case, no matter what the cause for how he acted around us, he was gruff, impatient, judgmental, caustic, short-tempered, neglectful, cynical, shaming, perfectionistic, controlling and, ultimately, abusive. I’m sure that he was probably loving and nurturing at other times as well. But the bad times outnumber the good in my memory of him and I have great difficulty remembering when I felt affirmed, valued, cared for, accepted, and loved by him as a child. He was a hard man for me to feel close to, to trust, and to love.

Not surprisingly, the process of growing up with him also left me with lifelong emotional scars and my own painful emotional “baggage.” He never seemed to have much time for me or my interests. There were the occasions when I tried to “help” my father with various household or yard projects that he felt were important to accomplish. These often served as additional opportunities for him to become impatient and shaming about my lack of knowledge or my inability to find a tool or to do a task that he had requested of me. I still all too frequently feel intense anxiety when I begin any kind of significant project around my own home in the present even though I have begun and successfully completed a multitude of home improvement projects on my historic home. This anxiety I feel is part of the legacy that I still carry from those difficult experiences with my father.

We sometimes did recreational activities that he enjoyed like hunting pheasants or ducks, spending the entire day from early in the morning to late in the afternoon walking through cornfields or

sitting in a rowboat waiting to shoot something. I did not enjoy these experiences at all, I had no desire to hunt or kill animals as a child, and I have not hunted since adolescence. In the end, there just didn't seem to be much room for what a kid (or, at least, this kid) needed or wanted in my father's way of looking at and living in the world.

He seemed to expect that his children would also be those "little adults" who knew and did what they were supposed to do (and did it very well, whatever "it" happened to be). I guess that really isn't much of a surprise given that moniker of the "little professor" that he had received from his parents as a child due to his studious and serious nature. What we were supposed to do always meant what he expected us to do. Unfortunately, I often had great difficulty knowing exactly what that was because, at least with me, he wasn't a very effective communicator. In the end, the basic message I received as a child was that I was never quite good enough and had never quite done enough and, consequently, that I was not a very worthwhile, effective, or successful human being.

There were numerous traumatic events and "governing scenes" (see articles and quick facts about *Toxic Shame and Personal Empowerment* on this website for more information about the impact of these types of experiences on children) which are an important part of who I have been and who I continue to be at times even today. On one occasion, when I was about 11, my father and I were playing catch with a baseball in the backyard. I was not much of an athlete at that point in my life and to play catch with my dad was "a big deal" to me. To my surprise and horror, at one point he began to throw the ball as hard as he possibly could at me. I did not understand why he was doing this and I became frightened and completely overwhelmed in the situation. I eventually dropped my glove and ran away crying. This incident was never discussed and I never played catch with him again.

There were a variety of other times with him that were equally traumatic for me as a boy. These included the tension and anxiety at the evening meals. He could quickly become impatient and frustrated at the dinner table by things we said or did (or did not say or do) which led to blow-ups and put-downs that seemed to literally come out of nowhere. My parents were also strong subscribers to the idea of the "clean plate club" of the 1950's (just think back to the "starving children in Armenia" that was part of that ethos). I remember on one occasion when I sat for hours after everyone else had left the breakfast table staring at a bowl of oatmeal that had become hard and rubbery. I eventually gagged it down. I have never eaten oatmeal as an adult; I have absolutely no desire to do this. I'm afraid that I would still gag on the oatmeal to this day.

The holidays could be problematic as well, as the additional stress around that time frequently led to caustic and shaming comments and hurt feelings. I almost always seemed to feel badly after all the Christmas presents were passed out and opened, never believing that I had received the quantity or quality of presents that my siblings did. I look back now and wonder if I was missing something other than the material possessions I was so focused on during those holiday times.

Other difficult moments included rides and vacations in the car, when my father would explode and threaten us when my siblings and I were "acting up" with one another in the back seat. There were actually times when my father instructed me to get out of the car in the middle of the country and then drove away, leaving me stranded. He always returned but I never really knew, for certain, whether he would come back to get me and those ended up being terrifying experiences for me as a child.

There were also my father's responses to my report cards. I was a pretty bright kid and did well in school, generally getting all A's. When I did get an occasional "B," his only reaction to my otherwise stellar report card was, "***What happened here?***" It seemed that I was never doing quite as well as I should have been (at least according to him and his standards).

My younger brother, who also happened to become a psychologist, shared a story with me about the last time he played tennis with our father. Art was in the sixth grade and was becoming a better tennis player through his involvement at the local tennis club. On one occasion, he beat my father in a set of tennis for the very first time. They never played tennis again (and, of course, never talked about what had happened or why they didn't play after that particular experience).

On another occasion, when I was home for the summer between my junior and senior years of college, my father became so angry that I would not go out to eat lunch with him on a particular day that he threatened to cut off the money that he was contributing toward my college education.

An incident at Christmas time in the early 1980's with one of my nephews brought back a flood of painful memories about what it had been like to grow up with him as a father. We were celebrating the holiday at my parents' home. My nephew, who was probably 5 or 6 at the time, had received an electric train set as a present from his mother. My father, my brother, my nephew, and I were in the process of putting the set together and getting the train running. The train tracks were extremely difficult to piece together and all of us, including my nephew, were struggling mightily with the process of connecting them. I was actually wearing winter gloves to protect my hands from the very real pain that the metal tracks could inflict on me.

All of a sudden, my father noticed that my nephew was having a hard time putting the tracks together. He gave him a withering look and immediately launched into a torrent of caustic and shaming comments: "***That's it. Go ahead. Keep it up and you're really going to break it. Then you won't be able to use it at all. What's the matter with you? Can't you do anything right?***" It had been several years at that time since I had personally experienced my father's shaming attitudes in this overt sort of way but his interaction with my nephew literally transported me back in time to my own childhood and the many shaming experiences I had with him. My brother and I talked in the kitchen later that day about how familiar and painful it had felt to both of us. After my father had concluded his "rant," my nephew looked devastated, lowered his eyes and stared at the floor, started fidgeting, and completely stopped trying to put together the special Christmas present he had received from his mother.

I was literally terrified to be around my father as a child. He was an intimidating and imposing presence even though he became physically abusive with me on only two occasions. But his cynical, disgusted, contemptuous attitude; the menacing and frightening looks; the mocking and condescending voice dripping with venom; and the quick mind that could rip me apart emotionally at any moment threatened me to my core. His looks and actions often left me feeling hurt, inadequate, incompetent, scared, sad, and underneath it all, very angry. When I was young, however, it was easier just to stay quiet and go along as best I could. It just wasn't safe to try to stand up to my father for much of my childhood.

The anger issues that I eventually developed myself were further exacerbated by the fact that I was ridiculed and bullied by other children around me as well. Unfortunately, but probably not much of a surprise, I felt insecure and uncertain when I was interacting with peers. My home life didn't prepare me very well to handle myself in difficult situations in the world-at-large. I was smart and did well

academically but was also one of those “chubby” kids who wasn’t very good at playing sports (generally one of the last picked for teams on the playground during recess in elementary school). In the 1950’s, I, as that “chubby” kid, also had the jeans that overweight children wore at the time. These jeans had a tag on the back near the waist with the word “Husky” on it. That let everyone around them know clearly that whoever was wearing these jeans was actually a “fatso,” another significant mark of shame in my early years.

As a result of this and numerous other factors, I was often the target of bullies in a variety of settings. There was the time during elementary school when a neighbor boy picked a switch off a plant in his backyard and began whipping me on my bare legs. I ran home crying, knowing in my heart that I was “weak” and a “loser;” I didn’t wear shorts again for two or three years after that experience. Or there was the time on the school bus in junior high when a bigger boy sitting behind and across from me kicked my left leg the entire way home. I was terrified at the time and completely paralyzed, having no idea about how I should respond to this physical assault. Or another time when a boy in junior high acted as if there was something to look at on the ceiling and then gave me a karate chop to my throat (everyone around us thought this “joke” was uproariously funny but I didn’t find it quite so humorous). And then there were the scores of pushes, shoves, and punches that were simply a part of my growing-up years. I was constantly fearful that one of the “greasers” would pick me out and want to fight me in the parking lot across from the junior high school after classes were done for the day.

There were also ongoing verbal assaults directed at me, which included name-calling, put-downs, and cursing and swearing, sometimes even by the boys who were supposed to be my “friends.” A disrespectful label directed at me that began in elementary school and stuck with me all the way through junior high was “5 D’s,” the shortened version of “*dirty, dumb, and dopey David Decker.*” This shaming, humiliating, and intimidating behavior by my peers was a perfect complement to what I was receiving and observing at home. Interestingly, to this day, I still remember many of the bullies’ names (those sorts of experiences are often literally etched into our very being). I quickly learned who I was and how I fit into the world around me. Not surprisingly, I didn’t believe that I fit in very well or had a place in the world where I could actually feel comfortable and trust others or myself. This learning that I experienced didn’t lead to much in the way of self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence. Sadly, these sorts of experiences often shape our vision of ourselves and the world around us, even well into adulthood.

When my father was angry, one of the words that he most frequently used to express his displeasure, contempt, disdain, and disgust with me was to refer to me or something I had said or done as “stupid.” As a young adult, that word became a powerful “trigger” for me to respond to others in an explosive and punishing manner whenever anyone had the audacity to utter that sentiment to me or about me. At long last, as I grew older, I believed that I was no longer that ineffectual little boy who was too fearful and timid to respond effectively to the “slights” and hurts that I had experienced. I was now someone who could not only stand up for himself but could also castigate and demean those whom I believed were trying to disrespect and hurt me. Even up until today, I still struggle at times with the word “stupid” as it reverberates in my own head anytime I make a mistake or someone else doesn’t do something the way that I just know it “should” be done.

But, as is noted above, my fear and my passivity started to change as I got older. I began to react and fight back with my father in my college years. I had learned my anger and abuse lessons well from

him and I could respond to his disgust, contempt, and abuse with my own disrespectful and caustic attitudes and behaviors. I simply followed the “life script” that was written for me and I used it to become as hurtful and disrespectful with him as he had been and was still being with me at times. I became a “rebel” in the way that I looked at him and the rest of the world. I had planned to go to law school, took and did well on the LSAT (a law school entrance exam), was admitted to law school, but then realized that this was not the path I wished to follow. My belief prior had been that being a lawyer or a doctor were the only real options for me as his son and as a man which had much more to do with my father’s vision of who and what I should be rather than my own. This actually ended up being a good decision; it was at that point when I decided to work with people and mental health issues, which has turned out to be a much better “fit” for who I really am and who I wanted to be.

It seemed like there was always something to explode about between my father and me: the length of my hair, the clothes I wore (he once actually tore a t-shirt off me because it had a hole in it), having sex with my girlfriends, experimenting with drugs, living together with my partners, the folly of the war in Vietnam and the righteous indignation of the student protestors, the “left wing” politics of Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern, the criminal escapades of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew, and even the validity of chiropractic medicine. At one point, when I had moved back to my hometown after my first stint in college, my father loudly declared to me that the community of 45,000 where we were both living at the time *“isn’t big enough for the both of us”* (and he had no plans to go anywhere else). Our contentious relationship continued this way for 13 years, leading to obvious stress, tension, and volatility at family gatherings, several abrupt departures by me on the holidays and at other times, and a visibly strained and uncomfortable relationship for both of us and anyone who had the misfortune to be around us at those contentious times. I, on one occasion, drove one and a half hours to get to my parents’ home for Christmas, only to walk out after a “yelling match” with my father, spending less than an hour at that particular holiday “celebration.”

Not surprisingly, my own attitude toward myself and others became a mirror of what I had experienced growing up with my father and my peers, leading to my creating emotional pain, chaos, and destructive behavior in my own life and in the lives of some of those folks who tried to get close to me. It actually started in childhood with my picking on and trying to intimidate my brother, who was four years younger than I was. I went through a series of relationships with partners in my 20’s where I experienced significant struggles with my own disrespectful anger and with my desire to control the women in those relationships, all in the misguided attempt to ensure that I would not be controlled and disrespected by others as I had been for so much of my early life by my father and my peers. I also became more aggressive with men and women generally. I became overly sensitive to perceived “slights” and “snubs” by others and I developed a “thin skin” when it came to interacting with other people, often reacting in a disrespectful way when there were actually other good options in how I could have responded. I just expected and believed that other people were going to try to “mess” with me in some way and that I was going to have to “deal with it” in some fashion. But this time I was not going to be as “unprepared” and “inept” as I had been as a child.

I sometimes “feuded” with friends who were close to me, at times not speaking for up to six months at a time when we disagreed about something that I (or they) deemed to be important at that point. There were conflicts with and estrangement from my siblings as an adult, including a span of fifteen years



when I had absolutely no contact with one of my sisters after our father's death (an interesting counterpart to my father's estrangement and lack of contact with his own sister in their adult years). I became, in the eyes of some of my supervisors and administrators at work, a "pop-off" and a "troublemaker" ("aka" a "rebel") who was willing to speak up directly to authority figures whenever I deemed this to be necessary. I had very little time or energy for organizations that treated me or other "front-line employees" (who were actually doing the work that needed to get done in order to fulfill the mission of the organization) in arbitrary, capricious, disrespectful, or demeaning ways.

I didn't much like or trust "authority figures." I had difficulty seeing them as helpful or truly interested in me, with the exception of one work supervisor, Steve Pranschke, at the community mental health center where I worked, who saw value in me and the job I was doing and gave me the responsibility and independence that was necessary to do it. This view of authority figures certainly made sense in terms of my relationship with my father, who was the first and most important "authority figure" in my life and really didn't seem to have my best interests at heart in the way that he viewed and treated me.

I became overly competitive and a "hothead" at times when I was playing sports in softball, volleyball, and racketball leagues. I found myself to be easily "steamed up" with other drivers on the roadways and even with complete strangers when out in public settings. I expected the worst from other people and I was ready to "take them on" whenever something "bad" was happening around me or to me. And I generally felt completely justified in "going off" on others around me because of what "they were doing to me." I had no interest in being bullied anymore and I made sure that this did not occur, often reacting aggressively even when this was not a helpful or necessary response. It was as if my "father" and the "bullies" from my youth were everywhere in my adult life (even though I'm not sure I realized this at the time).

Interestingly, however, this did not mean that my sense of self-doubt and insecurity was no longer present. In fact, it was generally there as much as or more than ever. I often felt anxious with people I didn't know and in new situations, fearing that I might be judged by them as "lacking" or "deficient" in some way. Cynicism, hostility, and aggression often masked my insecurity, however, and served as an effective but temporary defense and escape from a difficult situation. But the anxiety I had felt so strongly in my childhood was still present and, even up to the present, it is still a part of how I view myself, other people, and the world around me at times in my day-to-day life.

Fortunately for me, near the end of my father's life, there were some significant changes in my relationship with him. When he retired as a physician, he became even more depressed, a depression that seemed to clearly stem from the abrupt loss of his identity as a "productive," "important," and successful individual in his community and in society-at-large. He did not want to continue to work full-time after age 65, but his institution, at the time, was not progressive enough to realize that, even working part-time, doctors like my father had a great deal to offer their patients and the medical field in general. He could have worked at a small medical clinic in the community, but he didn't do so, probably viewing this as a "step-down" in terms of prestige and responsibility. He was offered a position with a noteworthy national organization related to his specialty but he did not want to do the traveling that would have been necessary to assume this role and he did not accept the position. He tried being an "expert witness" on a few occasions in courtroom dramas related to his field, but he hated the contentiousness and lack of

respect he received from opposing attorneys in this role. He said he wanted to write about his family of origin and his life experiences (he had published scores of medical research articles in scholarly journals throughout his career), but he never got around to doing much more than jotting down information about the weather and what he had eaten during the day in his diary. This was a significant loss for me (and my siblings) in understanding him, his parents and his childhood, and where he came from and how he became the person that he was.

He was never willing to get any sort of treatment for his depression despite my urging him to do so on multiple occasions. However, the depression and a relatively “minor” heart attack two years after he retired, which was very painful and frightening to him at the time although it was not life-threatening, seemed to create in him a stronger desire to emotionally connect with me and my siblings. It was at that point that my interactions with him became significantly more open, caring, and emotionally genuine and less hostile, punishing, shaming, and explosive.

A critical “turning point” in my relationship with my father occurred in the spring of 1983. One of my sisters and I were “feuding” because of a long-ago debt that had come between us. At the previous Christmas, my parents had “confronted” me about how badly I was treating my sister and I had left their home “in a huff” after only an hour. From that point until April, my relationship with my parents was noticeably strained with decreased phone contact (they had usually called once a week on Sundays) and emotional “coldness” when we did manage to speak. I eventually asked my parents to meet with me the following spring to address the issue that had come between us fearing that, if the situation did not improve, this would essentially mean the end of any relationship I might have with them moving forward.

I drove to Rochester and spoke first to my mother, hoping that, as the family caretaker and a “people pleaser,” she might start and encourage the process of reconciliation. That was not to be the case, however. She seemed to be very angry with me about the situation with my sister and blamed me for what had happened between the two of us. She clearly communicated this through her shaming words to me at the end of our conversation when she stated simply, “*I don’t know if I can ever forgive you for what you have done.*”

Disheartened and very apprehensive, I left the den where I had met with her and went into the family room to talk with my father, who was sitting in his favorite rocking chair watching TV. I was terrified that he, as the kind of person he had been for so much of my life, would also rebuff me in the same way that my mother had (and that his mother had at the time of his own father’s death). But, to my amazement and joy, he didn’t do that this time around. The words he offered me were the kind of affirmation I had always sought from him as my father. He said to me, “***Dave, I love you and I have always loved you. This issue is between you and your sister. You two are going to need to sort it out. And I’m sure you’ll be able to do just that.***”

I was astonished at the clarity of his understanding about the situation and his willingness to detach from the conflict between my sister and me and to offer me those words of encouragement, love, and support. I was also overcome with joy at the emotional connection that I felt at that moment with this man who was so important to me in so very many ways. For much of my relationship with my father, he seemed to be a man who did not really know how to love another human being; this was a moment in time when he actually did. My relationship with him was significantly different and more positive from that point on. Interestingly, when my mother joined us in the family room, after rebuffing and rejecting

me so strongly just a few minutes earlier, and viewed the warmth and emotional connection that my father and I were experiencing, she immediately tried to join in, probably fearing that she would be “left out” of the relationship that we appeared to be developing in that moment.

Sadly, a year after his heart attack, my father was diagnosed with prostate cancer that eventually metastasized to his bones. The reality of his new openness to me seemed primarily related to the vulnerability and fragility that he himself felt at this point in his life due to the loss of his career and the illnesses he was suffering rather than any of the many efforts which I had made to be closer to him over the years. His bluster, bravado, arrogance, entitlement, and psychological defenses were significantly diminished. But I felt very blessed in my good fortune, for a brief time at least, to make a more positive and affirming connection with this man who has been such a powerful influence on my life.

However, in reality, his negative influence on me up to that point was still profound and, in so many ways, that “life script” I carried with me (for more about “life scripts,” see articles and quick facts on this website about *Toxic Shame and Personal Empowerment*) continued in my own life journey. In the summer of 1989, my brother and I, as a gift to our father, who was too ill and weak to participate, had decided to till and plant his vegetable garden, as he had always done himself every summer since we had moved to this house in the late 1950’s. It was a large space and we bought all kinds of different plants and seeds and dutifully dug up the soil to get it ready to be planted. After the garden plot was prepared, the two of us stood staring for several minutes at the tilled earth before us, completely immobilized, seemingly unsure of what exactly we needed to do next.

After a short while, we turned and looked at one another, smiled, and then began to laugh out loud. Both of us knew what the other was thinking. Here we were, two competent and capable adults who had helped our father with his gardens in the past and grown our own gardens as well, trained as psychologists who understood both individual and family dynamics, and we were still terrified to make any kind of “mistake” in the planting of this particular garden at this particular time. Our father, even as he was approaching his death, was still the overwhelmingly powerful influence he had always been for each of us. We weren’t sure if we could really do things the “right” way (whatever that was supposed to mean). We were still concerned that he would become angry and shaming about what we had done “wrong” even though, at this point, he was simply grateful and happy that we were planting this garden for him at all. The messages he had given us so very long ago still reverberated in our minds and spirits and dramatically affected what we thought and how we felt, and even how we acted in that moment on that warm spring day. At that point, we rolled up our sleeves and we went ahead with planting his garden. Our father, in reality, was overjoyed as he gazed at the garden from his wheelchair at the living room window. My brother and I felt good about not succumbing to our inner demons this time around.

As he lay in the hospital in 1990, shortly before his death, he talked with me about the greatest fear that he was experiencing related to actually dying and moving on to “the other side.” He had read and heard about some “near-death experiences” and believed in the idea that, as he was dying and walking toward the “bright light” at the end of the “tunnel,” he would be greeted by someone who had been important to him in his life on earth who had already passed on. This person would then serve as his guide to that “other side.” He expected that person to be his father. But the overwhelming fear he expressed in his hospital bed that day involved the belief that he would see his father as that “guide” and that his father would turn around and walk away from him, leaving him alone once again. I took my

father's hand, looked into his eyes, and said, *"I think your father will have learned a lot since he left this earth. I don't think he'll walk away from you this time."* I held and stroked his hand and cried about the emotional pain he must have experienced over the course of his life. It was as close as I ever felt to him. He died on July 17th of that year at the age of 72.

I had a dream about my father the night after he died that was powerful and poignant for me and offered me a peaceful and helpful ending to his life. I dreamed that my father was standing in the dining room of my childhood home, leaning against the dining room table. He still looked a bit shaky and I walked up to him and gave him a hug. He winced a bit as I was doing this and I asked how he was doing. He said that he didn't have as much pain (his pain related to the metastasis of his prostate cancer to his bones had been excruciating) and that he was feeling better now. I felt a deep sadness about the fear and physical pain that this man had experienced in his illness and the significant emotional pain that was there within him throughout his entire life. But I also felt happy that all his pain was finally getting better, that he was moving on, and that he had re-entered my life through this dream to let me know that he had gone to a better place.

In reality, my relationship with my father has been both a profound curse and a very real blessing for me. I internalized many of the shaming messages that I received from him as a child and I became one of most negative, cynical, and angry people that I know (and yes, this includes the many clients I have worked with over the many years I have been in practice as a therapist). That negative life script has been destructive both to me and to those close to me on many occasions in my own life. I have made a lot of mistakes. And I continue to struggle, at times, with this "dark side" of who I can be. My life, at present, is very different in terms of how I treat the people around me. I'm not willing to make the choice to be disrespectful, punishing, and abusive with other people, especially the people who are most important to me. I have learned to be assertive and address difficult situations that arise around me, but I do it in a much more effective and respectful way. However, I still get too easily irritated by things that don't really matter much in the broad scheme of living my life: computers, printers, and other mechanical devices that don't do what I want them to do or think they ought to do for me; trying to navigate the internet and get what I want from a variety of different websites; not doing as well as I think I should on home projects related to the 1908 house where I currently reside; getting put on hold when on the phone for extended periods of time and being unable to connect with a actual human being who can help me resolve whatever my issue happens to be at the time; seeing trash that others have thrown on the ground in our neighborhood parks; drivers who tailgate me on the road; the various physical and medical issues that arise as I age; and getting all too "worked up" about the myriad ills that exist in our society and in the larger world, including the contentious, disrespectful, and divisive politics and politicians that have completely overrun our country at this point. This "dark side" will likely always be a part of who I am and how I function in my life.

But my ability to join with my father at the end of his life, the insight and emotional connection he offered to me at that point in our time together, and my own drive to understand and take responsibility for who I am and what I do have been powerful forces in helping me recognize and work at changing the parts of me that are not helpful to me or to my relationships with others in my day-to-day living. In addition, the "demons" within me that I have come to know so well have provided me with a very real purpose and mission in my life: a passion to help myself and others transform those dark forces into

something more positive and constructive. Without my father's profound influence on me, I would not have become the person I am nor would I have embarked on the path that I have chosen for myself.

My goal in writing this workbook is to share the knowledge I have gained over the years about anger and its many toxic distortions through both my professional and personal journeys. This workbook is certainly about my academic and clinical experiences but it also reflects my life and how I have lived it. The workbook is dedicated to helping others to make a meaningful difference in their lives and helping them to embrace their "dark sides," respond to this part of themselves more effectively and, as a consequence of doing this, heal and grow into who they truly want to be (and, hopefully, then help those around them do the same thing).

Disrespectful, punishing, and abusive anger is always destructive to the angry person and to the people in his or her life. There is a deep and intense sadness, emotional pain, and insecurity that underlies all toxic and disrespectful anger. It can be a frightening and daunting task to look at and embrace that part of who you are and who you have been. But getting in touch with the sadness, the pain, and the insecurity is a vitally important part of the healing journey if you truly want to make real and long-lasting changes in how you live your life. I personally feel a very real and profound sadness about the messages that I and others were and are given that lead to toxic anger (and toxic shame) in our lives, about the damage these messages create in our lives (and in those around us), and about the state of our country and the larger world as a result of this incredibly destructive process.

I clearly know and appreciate the difference that education and specific and pragmatic tools and strategies can make when it comes to handling our anger more effectively. It can literally transform your life! This workbook is offered to you, your families, and your organizations in the hope that together we can make this into a more caring, loving, and peaceful world for all of us. Thank you in advance for taking the time to read the workbook. I hope you will find it to be a helpful part of changing how you experience and express your own anger. I welcome your comments, feedback, reactions, and questions related to anything that you see as you are going through this workbook and program. I also encourage you to feel free to contact me at any point about your thoughts and experiences in using this resource to help you feel better about yourself, become the person you truly want to be, and come closer to those who are most important to you in your life.