



A STUDY OF MALIGNANT NARCISSISM

Personal and Professional Insights

Richard Wood



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A Study of Malignant Narcissism offers a unique insight into malignant narcissism, exploring both its personal and professional aspects and constructing a theoretical framework that renders its origins and manifestations more accessible.

With reference to his own family dynamic and to 45 years of professional experience, Richard Wood explores the psychology of malignant narcissism, positing it as a defence against love. The book first offers an overview of existing literature before examining relevant clinical material, including an analysis of Wood's relationships with his own parents. Wood presents vignettes illustrating the core dynamics that drive narcissism, illustrated with sections of his father's unpublished autobiography and with his patient work. The book makes the case for malignant narcissism to be considered a subtype of psychopathy and puts forth a framework setting out the key dynamics that typify these individuals, including consideration of the ways in which malignant narcissism replicates itself in varied forms. Finally, Wood examines the impact of narcissistic leadership and compares his theoretical position with those of other clinicians.

This book will be of interest to clinical psychologists, psychoanalysts, and psychotherapists, as well as all professionals working with narcissistic patients.

Richard Wood, PhD, is a psychoanalytically oriented clinical psychologist based in Ontario, Canada, with over 45 years of experience. He was educated at Cornell University and Wayne State University.

'A Study of Malignant Narcissism is an essential contribution to the growing literature on dangerous personalities and the destruction they cause. Courageous, searingly honest, and deeply moving ... A rare combination of compelling biography and crucial work of science, this is essential reading for our disordered times. An invaluable work of wisdom and experience.'

Ian Hughes, *Senior Research Fellow, MaREI Centre at University College Cork, Ireland*

'This fine book offers a marvellous combination of often hair-raising raw experience with thoughtful, illuminating reflection and insightful commentary. Dr Wood throws much needed light on character formation and function, defensive deformation of personality, ... and resilience. This is a courageous, timely, well written, important book.'

Dr Brent Willock, *Founding President of the Toronto Institute for Contemporary Analysis, Canada*

'With superb prose, Dr. Wood provides a scholarly and informative description of the characteristics and behaviors of individuals with narcissistic personalities ... For anyone wanting to learn about psychopathy and malignant narcissism, and how this knowledge might apply to autocratic leaders, this is the book to read.'

Graeme J. Taylor, MD, FRCPC, *Psychoanalytic Fellow of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry and Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto, Canada*

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To my spouse, Mary Walton, whose inspired love made this book possible and to my mentors, Dr. Kenneth Davidson, Dr. Paul Lerner, and Dr. Ray Freebury whose warmth, gentleness, and wisdom helped me become human.



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Preface

This is a book that I have known I would have to write eventually. While most of the ideas that inform this book declared themselves to me in my 40s as I struggled to make sense of my own experience with my family and, of course with my patients, it was always a book I planned to dedicate myself to once I had substantially retired. This is a piece of work that I have both looked forward to and dreaded. I knew that if the book was to be understood it would require me to share my inner life with frightening candor. While I am very open with my friends and my loved ones, finding deep sharing very meaningful and sustaining, my circle of intimates is relatively small and very familiar to me, allowing me to navigate my way through my world in a way that feels mostly manageable.

A work of the kind that I am embarking upon, however, requires me to open doors to any who would choose to read what I have written. Doing so feels like an enormously uncomfortable venture and a very unsafe one. Off-setting what I can only describe as an imposing sense of trepidation is my hope and – compellingly – my conviction that what I have come to understand will better enable others to more deeply appreciate the human condition that defines us.

After some deliberation, I have had to admit to myself that I cannot adequately disguise case file material in a way that would ensure, to my satisfaction, that not only would patient identity be protected, but that patients could not recognize themselves when they read this book. I appreciate that many other authors have quite usefully and instructively included case or clinical material in their discussion of clinical entities. Much of this material has been helpful to me personally in my learning journey. Now that I am faced with the task, however, of incorporating my own work with patients into my text, I cannot conceive of doing so in a way that would not cause potential harm to a patient who comes to realize that I am talking about him or her. Even given prior permission/approval and a chance for a previous patient to review material I have written; I am well aware that with the unfolding of any attention this book receives there may be unintended consequences for such people that neither I nor they can foresee. As a consequence, I will only talk

about broad patterns or generalities that seemed to typify the two major groups of patients that I worked with – narcissistic personality disorders and the people that they impacted.

Finally, I have deep concern about the impact such an intimate look at a psychologist's personal struggle and his inner world might have upon those many people with whom I have worked over 40 years of practice. Inevitably, alarming and disconcerting for some, possibly shattering idealizations that people relied upon to help them heal and, perhaps simultaneously, affirming of their own humanity and the many variegated forms through which humanity expresses itself. Equally prominent for me is my awareness of those people who might choose to seek help for themselves in the future who might be dissuaded by a frightening view of a therapist's pain.

So, all in all, not such an easy work to consummate.

Psychotherapy itself, in my view, is an immensely personal undertaking, requiring a therapist to repeatedly draw upon their own experience and their own trauma to better understand a patient. Doing so demands endless – and probably always flawed – self-examination side-by-side companion personal therapy that punctuates the life of a therapist. The process is necessarily messy, ambiguous, and imperfect. Even with the support of intermittent psychotherapy of one's own and peer collaboration, a therapist can expect that he or she will inevitably lose their way many, many times during the course of their work. Sometimes patients evoke counter responses in a therapist that the therapist finds too deeply disconcerting to contain. Sometimes patient trauma activates the therapist's own traumatic experiences, immersing the therapist in a process called vicarious re-traumatization. Or sometimes the therapist's difficulty with their own lives at a particular point in time means that doing their job – listening, empathizing, understanding – becomes exceptionally challenging. Potential sources of compromise for a therapist are endless. Not all of them, even with extensive training, can be anticipated. Unless a therapist is possessed of exhaustive self-knowledge and exhaustive knowledge of the human condition – which none of us can be – a continuing commitment to try to know ourselves as well as we can is the best that any of us can do. This is the work of a lifetime and it is always incomplete, but without it there is little chance that we can recover ourselves and help the people we are meant to help when we get in over our heads. Getting in over one's head with greater frequency than one would like, I would maintain, is a constant of therapeutic work.

Even with a reasonable (but certainly always imperfect) understanding of who we are, where we come from, and what we have come to be, any of us, whether we are therapists or not, must still face a profoundly challenging struggle as we attempt to alter patterns and defenses that define us. Absent such an imperfect understanding – and for many people all but the most superficial look at the self is too painful to bear – relative blindness renders the possibility of becoming more caring, more generative, and more loving human beings that much more remote.

I believe that because the imperfect and messy process of looking at the self can be so disruptive, much of modern mental health initiative has become variably programmable, relieving therapists of at least some of the uncertainty and discomfort more extensive investigation of the self can create. Within the context of programmable work, therapists enjoy the benefit of more or less knowing what they are to do during each session. Therapist focus is on objectively reproducible technique. Programmable interventions also seem to be particularly amenable to numeric evaluation of therapy success. Both therapist and patient, then, have the reassurance of being able to confirm progress, session by session, towards realization of certain identified goals. Because programmable therapy tends to be short-term in nature, there is often not time to get stuck in the intricacies of either the patient's or the therapist's psyches. Therapeutic intervention is highly replicable and is ordained by clearly elucidated steps that define process. It is a good companion to an age that demands declarative answers and numeric verification.

It is argued by many in our contemporary surround that which cannot be quantified cannot be science; that that which cannot realize objective verification through vigorous research paradigm cannot produce real scientific data. But unless we look at what is happening inside us, we ignore who we are. Numbers can only capture some of these realities; words, it seems to me, do far better. Words, then, become the core tools and the essential means that we have to rely upon to make sense out of the self. Words can capture nuance, variegation, and complexity of thought and feeling in a way that still eludes algorithms and quantification. Imagine trying to construct even a relatively brief interaction with a friend that encompasses ambiguities of intent, feeling, and thought that play themselves out through gestures, facial expressions, and spoken words with a series of numbers or formulas. How does one assign a number to insouciance? Or to irony? And how would one convey the potentially complex mix of emotions implicit in eye rolling? To my mind, words represent the best means that we have – and the most precise – to approximate, to share, and to explore phenomenology. And even with the wonderful precision and explanatory power of words, we can never fully describe or define our internal realities – not until even more effective tools than words present themselves to us. Using words, we construct models and suppositions of what we think takes place in people, displacing them with better models and better suppositions as we seem to deepen our awareness of ourselves. The study of phenomenology progresses, much like any other science, through a series of insights, reappraisals, missteps and new clarifications. It may feel more ungovernable, more chaotic, and more elusive than other branches of science, particularly the physical sciences, but I'm not sure that it is. In the end, as Mark Twain famously suggested, what we know may ultimately be limited by our inherently flawed capacity to be honest with ourselves.

Our best but inevitably continuously changing grasp of phenomenology will have to marry itself to wonderfully, spellbindingly complex interactions with

epigenetics, genetics, brain function, biochemistry, and the dynamics of disease and healing.

As an aside, I should emphasize that I do feel programmable and evidence-based psychotherapeutic interventions, like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), make a significant contribution to mental health remediation, though perhaps not to the extent that we once believed that they did. Importantly, they offer an alternative to the risks of intense self-exploration that render intensive, extended self-awareness work unsuitable for many people; they create a therapeutic milieu that is more tolerable for many therapists; they facilitate training of greater numbers and greater varieties of therapists; and, not inconsequentially, they make a more affordable form of psychotherapy (because it is generally shorter-term in nature) available to greater numbers of people than extended self-awareness work can. Programmable work also affords people the opportunity to engage in limited self-exploration within the context of a relatively safe paradigm. Its major drawbacks are its capacity to address mental health problems characterized by severity, chronicity, and long-term risk. I would also say that it is less well equipped to provide us with the full range of tools and conceptualizations that we need to more meaningfully extend our understanding of who we are. Intensive self-awareness work is better equipped to do the latter, but it can produce painful, disorganizing confrontations with the self that may be catastrophic for an individual to bear. Great care has to be taken in its application. Because it is often (though not exclusively) long-term in nature, it also tends to be much more costly than various forms of programable symptom relief intervention.

Both approaches are valuable, then, and both are possessed of limitation. And both approaches, of course, represent legitimate approaches to science. It also has to be said that, at present, there are many forms of mental health challenge which neither approach can adequately address, even with the help of psychotropic medication.

The microcosm of the two therapeutic worlds I have just referenced offers us a portrait of what I think we see in the larger world around us. I would say that we appear to live in an age in which problems – particularly human problems – demand simplistic conceptions consisting of soundbites that belie the extraordinary complexity of the issues we are trying to make sense of. Binary thinking and binary choices seem to reassure us. Truth can only be true if it is simple and, one might add, visceral and therefore easily accessible. Problems must be actionable and solutions realizable through a series of declarative steps imbued with moral imperative. We must have the one right or true way to do a thing rather than admit the bewildering array of alternatives and ambiguities which real-life complexity creates for us. Complexities and ambiguities confuse us and frighten us. We'd much prefer the comfort and reassurance which "simple truths" seem to afford us – even if, in adhering to them, we cause damage to ourselves, to others (including other species), and to our planet. Voices which cry for change and for a more accurate

representation of reality are often met with outrage, indignation, denunciation, and even attempts to obliterate.

We cling to the truths we create for ourselves with ferocity and tenacity. Those who favor ceaseless exploration and curiosity about the self and about the world around them (and much of humanity does) are felt to create jeopardy for those who don't. The inherent tension between these opposing forces within human nature has the potential to be constructive, enhancing either growth or stability in orderly turns. When appreciation of nuance and complexity becomes too prominent or moves ahead too rapidly or in a seemingly ungovernable fashion, human nature finds itself locked in combat with its fractious parts. Combat is real – moral, psychological, economic, and physical. Old forms of thought and being which define old identities face compromise. Safety is forfeit. Means of distinguishing friend versus foe and good versus bad are rendered more tentative. And the self loses the underpinnings and moorings that it relies upon to insulate itself against the inherently chaotic and disordered inner world we must all somehow find a way to live with. It seems that more of our inner lives we wall off to make ourselves safe, the more dangerous it becomes to tolerate knowing the self. The struggle to find ways to feel safe with our inner world appears to be a core human conflict.

I would suggest the war we wage within ourselves has escalated in modern times. I would also say that we risk annihilation if we do not find the means to know ourselves better – however imperfectly, but better. Every age probably perceives its struggles in epic proportions and every age might wish to say of itself that it is the best and the worst of times. Never, it seems to me, has humanity shown such promise and never has it been so close to its own end. It is my hope that in sharing some of the darkness in my own soul and the souls of those close to me in my family of origin I can help – even if only in a very limited, incremental way – to extend our willingness to examine who and what we are. I can make no claim that the models of the human psyche I piece together here are necessarily accurate representations of the phenomena I have attempted to capture. At most - assuming they are possessed of any value at all - they can only be approximations that, hopefully, will give rise to further discussion which refines and elaborates them in a more useful manner. This is a book about phenomenology – the study of our inner worlds - that treats me and four members of my family of origin as the objects of its study. The subject of this book is narcissism or, more accurately put, narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). NPD may express itself in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of severity; my exclusive focus in this work is on one particularly virulent or extreme form of NPD, which has sometimes been referred to as “malignant” narcissism. My clinical experience tells me that NPD is a continuum; it is my view that less virulent forms of NPD can be seen to share many of the characteristics and psychodynamics of malignant narcissism, differing largely in the degree to which they manifest themselves. I

recognize that many clinicians might disagree with my perspective. I'm also very cognizant that my clinical experience, while extensive in terms of years, necessarily represents only a small clinical sample of the ways in which narcissism expresses itself and the causes that lead to its development.

For ease of reference, I will use the terms malignant narcissism, narcissism, and NPD interchangeably, though I am very much aware that not all narcissism and NPD, though destructive to self and others, is imbued with the measure of malevolence I am attempting to investigate. It must be emphasized that some people who qualify for a diagnosis of NPD appear to be capable of leading relatively successful and productive lives, depending upon the metric that one applies. I also very much recognize that healthy narcissistic experience has its own constructive contribution to make to the human developmental process. In entitling my book "*A Study in Malignant Narcissism*," I hope to remind the reader that I am looking at an extreme variant of NPD. Malignant, unfortunately, carries with it connotations of pejorative judgement, but it is so compelling as a descriptive term I have decided to use it. I am not the first clinician to employ the diagnostic construct malignant narcissism (see, most prominently, Eric Fromm and Otto Kernberg, among others). Like other writers, I have constructed my own understanding of what malignant narcissism means based on both personal and clinical experience. The reader will see for him or herself whether my grasp of this particular facet of the human condition is possessed of any value.

As I noted earlier, this is a book I have always known I would have to write and that I had planned to write some time in my early-ish 70s. From my point of view, the center stage that Narcissistic Personality Disorder has occupied in recent years did surprise me, though perhaps, in retrospect, it should not have. It was never my intention to write about a particular individual or series of individuals, but rather to try to more deeply investigate what narcissistic personality disorder is. My preference was that I could have written a book about narcissism without it finding itself center stage in the midst of a maelstrom of controversy. But Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a profoundly important human phenomenon that has both served humanity well in some respects during the course of its evolution and, much more latterly, created potentially devastating future outcome for virtually our whole planet. Whether I would wish it so or not, it is timely that we intensify our efforts to understand such a pivotal variation of the human character.

From one perspective, malignant narcissistic personality disorder must surely be seen as a core form of human evil. It would appear to play a very important and at times central role in the various forms of suffering that we cause one another. In addition to as yet poorly defined biological and genetic factors, I would maintain that it can be a consequence of devastating early suffering that gives rise to terrible distortions of the human character. From this vantage point, it is neither good nor bad, but, rather, a variation of the human character, like any other, that demands respect, compassion, and

perception. Indeed, the devitalization of the human spirit it occasions imposes a lifelong agony and spiritual deadness upon those who must live with it. While an individual enduring NPD would rarely describe themselves as damaged, preferring instead to portray their destructiveness as strength, the torment that endlessly invades their day-by-day life must eventually become acutely transparent to any who would look.

I will not personally reference contemporary figures in this book. There are many contemporary figures, I believe, to whom the term Narcissistic Personality Disorder could be applied. To make the book about one or a select few individuals would defeat its purpose. The reader will see, however, that aspects of the literature on malignant narcissism and related concepts does engage clinicians' assessment of Donald Trump. My focus when I review this portion of literature will direct itself towards a description of the formulations that clinicians propose rather than on commentary they make about Trump. Side-by-side the rest of the literature review, the review chapter will help set the stage for the reader to critically evaluate my ideas. It also permits me, in the final chapter of the book, to compare and contrast my ideas with those of other clinicians.

And so, I begin, for me, a perilous journey.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I owe a great debt of thanks to my wife for her extraordinary patience in reviewing endless drafts of this book and for her seemingly limitless forbearance as she gently nudged me to structure content in a way that would make the book more accessible to my readers. She, more than anyone, knows my story intimately. While I'm aware that it was difficult for her to read about many aspects of my experience with my father, she persisted, allowing herself to be drawn into some of the darkest corners that I explore, emerging from them to offer insight and demand clarification where it was needed. Thank you, Mary, for your companionship during what might otherwise have been an overwhelming journey had it been undertaken without your presence.

I must also express a debt of gratitude to the numbers of people who took the time to review the manuscript, often providing me with painstaking editing that must have required hours and hours of effort on their part. My old friend Dr. Timothy Gilmor, with whom I shared the mentorship of Dr. Paul Lerner and who has remained a dear friend throughout much of the entirety of my professional life, was one such person. Another long-standing friend, Dr. Brent Willock, also invested an enormous amount of time and energy in reviewing the manuscript and in helping me work with it. His contributions, like Tim's, were deeply valued. So, too, were the contributions of relatively new friends, Dr. Donald Edwards and Dr. Susan Andresen, whose acquaintance I made subsequent to my relatively recent move to Stratford, Ontario. Like Tim and Brent, without hesitation they shouldered the task and moved through a somewhat imposing manuscript that I know Don, at least, found troubling to confront at times. It is my hope that my friendship with both of them and their partners will continue throughout my remaining years. Two other long-established friends, Don Duprey and Gia Levin, also indulged me by reading my manuscript, offering their own appraisals and thoughts. I also have to extend special thanks to my dear friend Ron Barzso, who read through the book several times and passed it out to numbers of friends.

Old friends whom I had the pleasure of reconnecting with, Dr. Ray Freebury and Dr. Graeme Taylor, not only took the time to read this book, but commented

on it extensively and wrote reviews. And, finally, I owe a considerable debt of thanks to my colleague and long-standing friend, Joel Kumove, for his thoughtful appraisal of the work.

I also reached out to total strangers – other mental health professionals whom I knew shared my deep concern about the terrible risks that dangerous personalities, like malignant narcissists, create for us when they assume positions of power and leadership. Dr. Ian Hughes was one such like-minded person. Having read his book, *Disordered Minds*, I could guess that we would hold important common ground with one another. I was right. Ian was not only receptive to my request to read a manuscript from someone he had never heard of, but demonstrated himself to be extraordinarily generous, proving to be not only a careful editor, but a source of support, affirmation, and encouragement. I would wish that our work will continue to lead us in similar directions in the future so that we might work together again. His presence in my life has been an unexpected gift. Other mental health professionals – Elizabeth Mika and Harper West took the time to read parts of the book and offer their comments. I express my gratitude to them as well.

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And lastly, I want to express my deep appreciation for my “new” family member, Melanie Ryan, for her extraordinary support. Without her willingness to rescue her mother and me from the terrors of working with a Word document converted from PDF format, I'm not sure this book would have ever made its way to the publisher. Thank you for your patience and encouragement.

Establishing an Attitude of Skepticism

Relying on memory to accurately capture one's early, formative experiences may be a fool's errand predicated, as it has to be, upon unappreciated misconception, misapprehension, and reality bending distortions as one attempts to protect the self from early insults. Acuity of remembered perception must always be co-mingled with formidable limitations. While it can plausibly be argued that the subjective realities that define contemporary inner narratives and experiences are the only "realities" that a therapist can legitimately deal with, there is recognition that the subjective realities that define us now may not correspond in the ways that we think they do with our early experience. At the moment, differentiating what actually happened to us from what we think happened is, essentially, an insoluble problem. The more we know about memory – and the impact that trauma has upon memory – the more uncertain we must be about what we think we recall. We are left to grope in the dark with a bewildering array of memories, images, feelings, and variously successfully articulated experiences that we believe, with varying levels of conviction, tells us who we are.

As with any scientific endeavor, we begin by cataloguing what we think we see, establishing points of reference and putting the remembered past and the actualities that seem to define the present together as best we can, always reminding ourselves that both past and present (for the present is subject to the distorting impact of defenses as well) must be viewed with skepticism. At times, we have the advantage of watching a childhood as it unfolds and seeing somewhat more directly (but always imperfectly) the effect that a given set of circumstances has upon varieties of individuals. At other times, we may even have the benefit of longitudinal study that spans years, if not decades, of a given individual's life. Gradually, from a morass of gloriously imperfect "data" (some psychologists, at least, are said to love ambiguity), patterns begin to emerge that seem to enjoy various forms of validity confirmation – some from number science and some from carefully articulated accounts of the human endeavor. And gradually, cautiously, we began to invest incremental confidence in the science that emerges, always remembering we must be prepared to replace old ideas with better ones.

When meaningful patterns begin to define themselves, we cling to them much as a drowning man might cling to a life raft. We need them to be true in order for our world to feel safer. As the scales fall from our eyes and we begin to recognize their inadequacy, or feel it, we are cast adrift again to reforge other, hopefully better, explanations that will confirm for us there is order in the world after all. The desolation one feels as patterns, laboriously constructed, begin to fail us is, to say the least, extraordinarily disconcerting. Will we ever be capable of finding meaningful answers? Are the answers that we have found for ourselves the best that we will ever be able to devise – and if that’s true, how will we survive our ignorance? The wait for new answers – models that better approximate the human experience – can take years or even decades. Drifting around in the wilderness of one’s own thoughts and feelings seems interminable, and interminable engenders potentially suffocating despair. When new ideas finally do begin to present themselves, particularly when they are integrated into seemingly elegant patterns that appear to possess enhanced explanatory power, we are besotted by them, desperate, as we are, for means that allow us to pull ourselves away from the darkness. Elegance and coherence co-mingled with terrible need make such ideas hard to resist. Scientific skepticism ought to compel us to stand back from our creation and question it, but in so doing we evoke jeopardy for a self that is loath to give up the bits and pieces of order it has discovered. We must be ever mindful of this vulnerability if we are to test our ideas adequately and if we are to spur ourselves further into uncharted territory. For me, the answers that I pieced together and the models that I laboriously assembled into pleasing patterns felt like lifelines without which my psychic survival would not be possible. The tension between the desire to invest in them and the need to divest oneself of them when appropriate was ever present. One had to willfully remind oneself to resurrect skepticism. The struggle to do so was certainly not always successful.

I remember all too well the mixture of intense trepidation and anticipation when I entered graduate school. I would be talking to people and taught by people who knew about and understood the human condition; they could help support me in my heretofore hapless efforts to know more about myself and others. But such “knowing” would come at a cost. It meant that I would have to allow myself to be known. Very dangerous territory. Like so many other graduate students in clinical psychology (although I was convinced my own position was far more precarious than theirs), I imagined the immensity of my pain and my disordered interior would be both so transparent and so repellent I could expect to be quickly turned away. The pain I carried also meant that I was only capable of limited work effort and of episodic successes, sometimes confirming talent and sometimes deconstructing it. The etiology of the up and down course typifying my work ethic was beyond my means of apprehension at the time. I secretly and shamefully concluded this particular pattern represented moral failing. The frustration of my mentors seemed to

confirm episodic disappointment and disapproval, apparently reiterating my self-appraisal. I was unable to recognize that my teachers were truly as perplexed as I was, probably because they lacked conceptual frameworks that have become commonplace in psychology today. It did not occur to me, in other words, that the state of their knowledge was imperfect. There were glorious moments when I saw that was so, but, reflexively, I always turned any misgivings against myself.

As my graduate experience elaborated itself into years, I continued to feel confused – or probably, more accurately, astonished – that I had not been rejected. The sense of precariousness that had characterized the early part of graduate school persisted in succeeding years, in part because I did not see myself becoming a “knowing” being in the way that my teachers were and, in no small part, because I still failed to recognize that any of the answers I acquired through reading or through clinical experience and supervision were, essentially, only approximations, each of which was possessed of limitations and flaws that I mistakenly attributed to my own stupidity or backwardness. It was only with the passage of time that I recognized that I, like everybody else, was required to endure the painful solitude that I think we experience when we finally acknowledge there are no absolute answers – only imperfect ones. I wanted someone else to simply tell me how everything worked in the human psyche. I had to face the contentious and painful reality that if I wanted to know, I would have to make my own journey, admitting each step of the way the best I could do was a better idea.

I implore the reader again to remember that the ideas contained in this book are only approximations of reality, approximations that may be extended if they prove worthy, but will most certainly be changed or dismissed as we come to know more about ourselves.

I also want the reader to be aware that the ideas that I present in this book about narcissism represent the culmination of many, many other people’s work. I am building on their shoulders and am deeply indebted to them, not only for the literature that they produced, but for the personal endeavor that so many of my clinician colleagues undertook, either directly or indirectly, to help me grow and learn.

Many of these contributions are described in the literature review chapter which follows this one. In that chapter, I have tried to capture clinicians’ efforts to understand the dangerous form of personality organization that this book concerns itself with. Following completion of the literature review, the reader will see that I do not incorporate references to literature, with few exceptions, in the chapters that follow. I very much wanted to create a narrative that is uncluttered by repetitive literature citation; my intention is to draw my readers’ attention to the ideas and the extensive clinical material in the text, which, hopefully, I have managed to present in clear and accessible language.

I am inviting my readers to take a very visceral journey with me, one that I know may render the book hard to read for some people. As the book

unfolds, I will be exposing people to disturbing experiences that I endured which are meant to elucidate what it felt like to grow up in a narcissistic surround. I not only want the reader to see and hear about what happened; I want them to feel it. Only by being visceral can this book capture the distorting impact narcissists have upon the people close to them. In each chapter I have presented a series of experiences and vignettes that, although they may seem disconnected, are intended to incrementally provide insight into the nature of narcissism. If at various points along the way people find themselves confused and lost, their confusion, perplexity, and perhaps distress will serve to help them better appreciate what my own experience was like. The “voice” that the reader will find me using to represent my younger self is often an intellectualized one, very much reflective of my desperation to make sense out of all the chaos around me and inside me. At various other points, my despair, my horror, my helplessness, and my repugnance with the changes that were unfolding inside me will obviously eclipse the intellectualized or clinical tone that I attempted to establish for myself as a younger person and that I relied upon to protect me. If people can endure the companionship that I offer them – a kind of emotional partnership with me and with my childhood and young adult self – my hope is that the reader who persists will be rewarded with a depth of understanding of narcissism that would otherwise elude them. I believe that what I endured is not only indicative of what happens to family members exposed to a narcissistic other, but to much larger groups of people that may fall under the narcissist’s sway, including nations that they lead.

Chapter 2 provides an extensive literature review of salient commentary clinicians have offered with respect to our evolving grasp of what I am referring to as malignant narcissism. It will not attempt to describe conceptual work clinicians have undertaken in their efforts to understand forms of narcissism that fall outside the dangerous personality I’m attempting to investigate.

Chapter 3 will focus on my relationship with my mother, whose own formidable and ultimately lethal psychological liabilities rendered her exquisitely vulnerable to my father’s depredations. Her struggles for cohesion, for identity, and, ultimately, for survival were a deeply poignant part of my growing up experience.

Chapters 4 through 6 direct their attention towards a series of vignettes that are meant to capture some of the core dynamics that I believe drive narcissism. Each chapter builds upon the ideas that the previous chapter explored, though not always in an obvious way. Because the dynamic forces that characterize narcissism are entwined with one another, it was not possible to discuss each dynamic as a separate, discrete entity. Invariably, describing one set of dynamic themes implicates others. I have done my best to avoid repetition as I look at various facets of narcissism, but I have to beg the reader’s indulgence because, in order to explicate new constructs, I have to reference older ones I have already examined.

Chapter 4 is a foundational chapter in the discussion of narcissism. As I review a number of searing experiences with my father, I begin to explore what they mean. Towards the end of the chapter, I consolidate my reflections on both my father's behavior and my own internal responses to it into a number of important questions.

Chapter 5 investigates the nature of my father's "friendships." I identify various facets of his narcissism that shape the way that he relates to people.

Chapter 6 returns to a theme, via further vignettes, introduced in Chapters 3 and 4: my father's need to obliterate other personalities and other voices, replacing them with a version of his own. Chapter 5 also returns to another theme identified in the first two chapters: the apparent inclination of some of the people in my father's sphere of influence to incorporate his voice and his perspectives as their own with an almost celebratory zeal.

Chapter 7 calls attention to growing similarities between my father's manifestations of cruelty and those I recognize in myself. The parallels between his inner life and mine are felt to provide damning evidence of my own compromise. I document my growing fear that my humanity, like his, will eventually be displaced by the ugliness I see accruing inside myself.

Chapter 8 reviews two different kinds of psychological damage that were prominent in my response to my father's narcissism. The first was clinical depression and the second complex post-traumatic stress disorder. I discuss the dynamics of both extensively, closely examining the ways in which each manifested themselves in my father's life and in mine.

Chapter 9 looks back at my father's growing up years and young adulthood through the lens of the two extensive autobiographical statements he provided me. The autobiographies themselves have not been included in the body of my work because they are so lengthy. I have excerpted significant parts of them in the narrative that Chapter 9 provides. I was deeply appreciative of my father's willingness to construct these portraits of his life; they allowed me to penetrate narcissism and to piece together a far more deeply compassionate view of him, which was very much welcome, allowing me to reframe some of the anguish he had caused. I think there was a part of him that wanted me to know who he was, where he came from, and how he had come to be the man that he was. The autobiographies, in their original form, however, are also obviously self-serving; entirely absent in them is any indication of his awareness of the injury that he imposed on the people around him.

Chapter 10 makes the case that Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is best understood as a subtype of psychopathy. I take strenuous issue with the DSM-V conception of psychopathy and of NPD, elaborating upon my reasons for doing so. In this chapter I acknowledge the ambiguities and challenges of the diagnostic process.

Chapter 11 provides a synthesis and an elaboration of all of the ideas about malignant narcissism in the book into a single framework that attempts to formally conceive the compelling and most often destructive dynamics that

typify individuals manifesting this extreme form of narcissism. It is intended to capture the general case, rather than being a reference to my father's experience. It is meant to set the stage for the two chapters that follow, which also broadly reference the issues they are attempting to address rather than focusing on my father's dynamics specifically.

Chapter 12 considers the ways in which malignant narcissism replicates itself, sometimes by manifesting itself in other forms of psychopathy. I remind the reader of the important similarities that emerged between my psyche and my father's as I was progressively exposed to his narcissism. I spend the greatest portion of the chapter, however, describing my patients' responses to the influence of a narcissistic other. Various mechanisms of transmission of psychopathic traits are outlined in some depth. I also extensively describe various patterns of psychological injury people living in a narcissistic surround sustain. Characterization of injury and of injurious dynamics unfolds against the backdrop of what healthy human psychic development can look and feel like.

Chapter 13, moves from consideration of injuriousness narcissism occasions for family members and friends to investigation of the impact that narcissistic leadership has upon the governed. Extending what one sees in the family context to the context of a larger entity, like a state, produces a model of narcissistic leadership marked by brutality, toxicity, incitement to violence and hatred, inflammation of bigotries, generation of conspiracy theories, blunting of citizens' humanity, and movement towards an increasingly psychopathic national culture in which bullying and endemic fear progressively overwhelm decency. Quality of thought faces compromise; intellectual endeavor and truth both endure murderous erosion.

Chapter 13 also attempts to make sense of our susceptibility to narcissistic leadership, identifying numbers of potential factors that seem to contribute to our willingness to be led by this damaged and very damaging group of people.

Finally, Chapter 14 attempts to compare and contrast my conceptions with those of other clinicians. In the process, my intention is to delineate my formulation of malignant narcissism with greater clarity.