

## DIVIDED LOYALTIES: THE CHALLENGE OF STEPFAMILY LIFE

William J. Doherty

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Roy was still smarting from the divorce his wife had insisted on, but he was settling into a pattern of regular contact with his two boys, ages 7 and 5. During his first therapy session, Roy told me how afraid he was of losing his sons, now that his ex-wife had remarried and there was a new father figure living with them. I tried to be reassuring about his irreplaceable role in their lives, especially if he maintained steady connection with them. But in the second session, a distraught Roy told me that one of his boys had slipped and referred to their new stepfather as "dad." Roy sternly told both children that if they started calling their stepfather "dad," he would never see them again.

I don't know when I have ever had such a profoundly different internal emotional response than a client was showing. Roy was proud for having stood up for his rights, and I was horrified at his frightful threat to these young children: you will lose your father if you get close to your stepfather. Much as I felt liked saying, "What the hell are you doing to your children?" I started low key, with empathy for his fear and pain. I then elicited his concern for children by telling him how much I sensed he loved them, followed by the question "How do you think your children felt when you said this to them?" Roy immediately began to see what he had done. I helped his insight along by telling him that "the scariest thing young children can experience is the fear of doing or

saying something they will make their parent leave them forever."

My immediate goal was to enhance Roy's sense of moral urgency to make things right with the children. There would be time later to explore his insecurities. I wasn't concerned that he would feel guilty; he needed to feel guilty. Not the guilt that leads to paralysis and self-loathing, but the guilt that leads to corrective action. I told Roy that I thought this was an emergency in his relationship with his sons, one that I urged him to attend to right away--that evening if possible--because they were living with the fear that they had alienated him forever.

With tears, Roy reaffirmed that there was nothing his boys could ever do to make him abandon them. Touched by his clear remorse, I gently suggested that he say those words directly to his children, along with an apology from his heart. I also suggested he bring them to the therapy session next week to continue to work on restoring trust. This experience propelled Roy out of his self-pity after the divorce into a better-grounded commitment to his children. This case was also one of my early realizations of how remarriage can suddenly shake the tectonic plates of otherwise strong parent-child bonds.

I had begun my earlier work on parental loyalty and commitment with a focus on divorce as a moral crucible for fathers and their children. I came to believe that we must raise the bar of moral expectations of fathers to the level of mothers: you must be loyally committed to your children no matter what happens to your relationship with the other parent. But as I followed the thread of loyalty and commitment through the next phase of the life cycle, to remarriage and stepfamily life, more complex moral vistas opened up for me.

I came to see how stepfamilies enact unique morality plays, with plots involving

divided loyalties, betrayal, heroic commitment, and Solomon-like discernment. We have always had these stepfamily dramas with us, mostly in the past following the death of a parent, and now, more convolutedly, following divorce. Hamlet, perhaps the greatest drama in Western culture, is a stepfamily story that begins with a son who feels abandoned and betrayed by his mother's aborted mourning for his father and her too-quick affection for her new husband. Loyalty conflicts in the aftermath of loss--that is the perpetual plot line of stepfamily life.

What do I mean by loyalty? Loyalty is about the prioritizing of life commitments, about preferring those I am linked to by nature and nurture. Commitment alone is not enough: I may believe my father is committed to me but feel betrayed when he does not stand up for me with his new wife who does not want him to spend time alone with me. Without loyalty, the central longings of family life--for being loved, nurtured, protected, and cherished--have half-lives shorter than some subatomic particles. Loyalty is what allows us to say "my" child or "my" parent or "my" spouse in a thick web of morally laden expectations. It is not just a feeling or sentiment. It is demonstrated in our behavior and our choices, and, as family therapy pioneer Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy has shown, it reverberates through the generations.

Historically, parental loyalty to children has been seen most often as a "covenantal" commitment as opposed to a "contractual" commitment of quid pro quo. Rich in religious tradition, the idea of covenant conveys irrevocability: God will always love, and do right by, the chosen people, no matter how they behave. Parents must always love, and do right by, their children, no matter how they behave. This is as close to a universal moral norm as we have in our world, a norm honored in every culture and

expounded in fields as disparate as evolutionary psychology and theology. Indeed, parental loyalty--the unbreakable, preferential commitment to one's children--is so taken for granted that it is not even included in the Ten Commandments. Perhaps abandoning one's child was so unthinkable to the ancient Hebrews that no commandment was necessary.

Loyalty struggles abound in stepfamilies because of the unbalanced triangles their members encounter. In reasonably healthy families with two original parents, the triangles are mostly balanced. A child's love for one parent does not compete with love for the other parent. For parents in original families, although new fathers' sometimes feel neglected by their wives' focus on the first baby, generally there is no fundamental competition for love between the generations, because both parents are strongly invested in the welfare of their biological children. If you are my spouse and caring for our children, you are indirectly caring for me.

But even in reasonably healthy stepfamilies, loyalty triangles are far from equilateral. Tilting emotionally towards one member feels like pulling away from someone else. For example, children who genuinely like their stepparents often feel loyalty binds more acutely than those who don't. I had to lean forward to hear as six-year-old Rachel told me, in a near whisper, that she did something she felt badly about after each visit to the two stepfamilies she shuttled between. Rachel had written down these feelings and experiences in a notebook so she would not forget them in the annual "check up" session she, her brother, and her divorced parents had with me.

When I asked Rachel what she did that made her feel bad, she said she always said something "a little mean" about what happened in the other family, often something the

stepparent did or said. Sometimes, she confessed, she kind of made things up. She felt compelled to say something negative soon after arriving in the other household, but then she felt guilty because she genuinely liked both of the stepparents as well as her original parents. She didn't think either family was inviting these disclosures, and no one seemed to pouncing on them. These small loyalty violations, and the attendant guilt, were coming from her six year old heart. After talking with her for a while, I asked if she was okay with telling her parents about her feelings. She was willing but asked me to go first in explaining things to them. The parents responded with empathy and reassurance after I brought them back into the room, and Rachel subsequently broke her cycle of small betrayals and guilt. Stepfamilies are full of weird emotional truths such as the one Rachel encountered: children can ignore or dislike their stepparents with less internal struggle than if they love them.

For stepparents, commitment to stepchildren is not a straightforward matter. Stepparents marry their spouse and must accept the reality of children who are not theirs. But most would admit, if asked for an honest response, that they wish that these children never existed on the planet, so that the couple could have a completely fresh start. Time that the original parent commits to the children is frequently a source of conflict, because the stepparent's personal agenda is less saturated with the needs of the children. And everybody in the family knows that the stepparent's commitment, at least in the early years, is not primary but secondary, contingent on the survival of the marriage.

The chief challenge of stepfamily life, I believe, is to deal with the divergent loyalties that manifest themselves in the tension between our responsibility to our

children and our commitment to our new spouse, in our courage or cowardice in standing up to our spouse on behalf of our children or to our children on behalf of our spouse, in our supporting or undermining our ex-spouse's new partner because that person is important in the lives our children, in our trying our best to love and nurture our stepchildren even when their needs conflict with our own. For children, the challenge is to find a way to honor the stepparent without dishonoring the original parent.

I have no first hand experience with stepfamily life. I am not in a stepfamily now and was not raised in one. But I have become fascinated with stepfamilies because they are like MRI machines that reveal the deep tissue of family life. For me, they illuminate, like no other family form, the subterranean moral domain of family life, the world of fairness and unfairness, loyalty and betrayal, commitment and abandonment, selfishness and altruism. Stepfamilies do this so well because they live with dramatic tensions that are never fully resolved. In original families, we can have our illusions of balance and harmony where moral conflict seems to disappear in a haze of one for all and all for one. Stepfamilies have no such illusions, and they can never relax their vigilance for long. I have seen boring original families, but never a boring stepfamily.

The other reason I am fascinated by stepfamily life is more personal. I think I have been pretty good at two-parent family life, and I imagine that I could be a fairly successful, if burdened, single parent. But I don't think I would be any good at stepfamily life. As an original parent, I would feel vulnerable and defensive about any criticism of my children and my parenting, and I could not resist pointing out my partner's obvious ignorance of effective parenting and of the true beauty and worth of my children. I do well now with my spouse and coparent who is as responsible for my

children's upbringing as I am. But in a stepfamily, without a spouse who is equally to blame for the mistakes, I would not be easy to live with.

But mostly I don't think I could be a good stepparent. My needs for centrality are too great to tolerate feeling like the third wheel in my own household. My patience is too limited to wait five or more years to get deeply into the family. I fear I would try to get close too quickly to my stepchildren (after all, I'm a therapist--I've got skills!), and then withdraw when rebuffed. I fear I would then react to feeling marginal by becoming a therapist/critic of my spouse and her children. And I would cope by working all the time in a professional world where I could feel central to the action. In short, with stepfamilies more than any other kind of family, I cannot use my favorite delusion that I could do it better. This makes less me distant, more empathic, more curious, and more flat out impressed when I see stepfamilies succeed at this impossible family form.

When it comes to actually working with stepfamilies, part of my fascination is the challenge to keep taking multiple perspectives. Although minor children's needs must have priority when it comes to parental loyalty, children are not the only ones with loyalty claims in stepfamilies. Original parents and stepparents have claims as well, and we ignore these as therapists at our peril. A case I supervised points this out.

Bob wanted some time alone with his new wife, Alice, who had three preteen children who took up most of her time. He was good with the children, and supportive of Alice, but feeling like a junior parent and not a spouse. Their therapist who consulted with me about the case told me about the session where this issue came to a head, in which the therapist, using a moral lens, supported the wife's obligations to her children

and encouraged the husband to understand that she needed his support as a mother with a job and multiple childcare responsibilities. As an adult, his needs would have to be secondary at this time in the family's life cycle, as is true for most families in the busy childrearing years. The therapist felt proud of his intervention, especially after Alice wept with the sense of being understood and Bob admitted that perhaps he was being selfish. A few days later, Bob left the therapist a message saying that they were ending therapy because the previous session had clarified things so well. The therapist was concerned about the plug being pulled on the therapy, and wondered if he had missed something.

What he had missed, in focusing on the mothers' sense of obligation to her children, was the husband's loyalty claims on his wife that went beyond their parent/stepparent roles. Bob was asking for some time to be married partners and not just co-parents. His wife was responding with the defense that nothing different was possible because the children's needs have to come first. But "children first" is a starting point for exploring family responsibilities, not an end point or a conversation stopper. Marital bonds bring their own obligations to love, cherish--and spend time with a partner who requests it. Alice and Bob were clearly able, if they prioritized it, to have weekend dates and to spend 15 minutes alone talking on most days. In this case, the therapist should have supported Bob's legitimate loyalty claims even though he was willing to surrender them in the session.

Supporting stepparents' claims for loyalty and fairness also helps enlist them in constructively dealing with the children and not playing critic to their spouse. In one family I worked with, the father's teenage daughters had always blasted the stereo until



late night, but their new stepmother went to bed at ten o'clock because she had to get up early. When she asked the girls to lower the stereo, they begrudgingly complied, then gradually dialed up the volume, only to repeat the same scenario the next night. I believed that the stepmother was making a legitimate claim on her husband for support in being able to sleep. Playing the stereo loud at night is not a fundamental right of childhood. I directly supported her request--and helped her couch it in terms of fairness--that the father spell out to his daughters that he prioritized his wife's needs in certain areas such as getting a good night's sleep. Stepparents often feel out of control in their own households. Visible and non-ambivalent demonstrations of loyalty by the spouse, in areas where the children owe respect for the stepparent's needs, can improve the stepparent's morale and teach important moral lessons to the children.

An irony about the loud stereo story is that the children would probably have been more sensitive to the needs of an aunt if she had been living with them than they were with their stepmother. An aunt is not supposed to be a "mother," and therefore does not threaten a child's loyalty to the "real" mother. Perhaps it would be less confusing to everyone if we abandoned the odious term "stepparent" ("step" is the middle English word for "bereaved") in favor of a new term that conveys the simple reality that "this is my parent's new spouse." Maybe we need a contest for a new name for the relationship between a child and a parent's spouse, a name that does not convey parental investment and authority and that does not immediately generate loyalty conflicts for children. Here's a start: children could say "this is my momsmate or my dadsmate"; adults could say, "this is my mateskid." The advantage is that these terms define the primary relationship as that between the parents, not between the stepparent and the

child. If you don't like these, come up with your own, something that does not carry the baggage of "stepparent."

But even with a change in words, some loyalty conflicts in stepfamilies will explode with remarkable force. I thought I had helped Phil and Marla, a remarried couple, navigate the treacherous waters of establishing a stepfamily. We were in the winding down phase of successful marital therapy that focused on how they could coparent Phil's two teenage children. Marla had no children of her own. The original mother lived out of state and had infrequent contact with her children, Nathan (age 15) and Kristin (age 18). Kristin had had a tumultuous adolescence, with regular temper flare ups at her mother which increased dramatically when she got involved with Phil. Although Susan had settled down somewhat in her senior year of high school, and had a better relationship with her stepfather, she was still unpredictable in her moods. What's more, as her behavior improved, her younger brother took her place as the family's lead source of conflict.

Although Phil and Marla had come to me for marital therapy, I invited the children in for several sessions. I saw first hand with how intense and challenging they were. They were uninterested in working on improving a stepfamily situation they had not signed up for. Neither of them was willing, when I talked to them alone, to get into their feelings about their mother's abandonment and their divided loyalties vis a vis the stepmother. Any changes in the family would have to come from Phil's and Marla's initiative, not from any direct efforts on the part of Nathan and Susan.

By the ending phase of the yearlong therapy, Kristen had gone away to college, and the father and stepmother had learned to mesh their roles better. Marla had moved

into a supportive, less critical role with Phil's parenting, and he was taking a firmer stance with his children. There had been slow, steady progress on the kids' behavior, although Marla still felt tense in the home. With their marriage on solid footing for the first time, we started to wind down our therapy work.

Then a marriage-breaking issue surfaced. In difficult early months of the marriage, when Kristen was 16, Phil had promised Marla that once his children left for college, they would be on their own. They would be expected to find their own place to live, with their father's financial support while they were in school. In other words, after high school they could be as visitors, but as members of the household. This agreement kept Marla's hope alive during the darkest days of stepfamily life. But the agreement was never shared with Kristen.

During her visit home at the Christmas break of her first year in college, Kristen told her father they she wanted to come home for the summer and find a job. Phil replied that he wasn't sure and would give her a decision later. This precipitated a melt down by Kristin, who accused her father of abandoning her. Until that point in the visit, Kristin's behavior had been better than when she was in high school, but still challenging. Now she was surly.

Phil's hesitation elicited a strong response from Marla. In the therapy session, Marla said that she did not believe she could spend another summer with Kristin. Marla believed she had done enough. She had given herself to an impossible stepparent role, had put up with disrespect, had learned to be a supportive co-parent and to temper her criticism of her husband's parenting. She felt her own health had been compromised, because her migraine headaches were worse than before she got married. She did not think

she could face another summer of stress with Kristin. What she wanted was for her husband Phil to keep his promise. Although 15-year-old Nathan was a handful, at least he was just one child--and he would be gone in three years too. One child gone and three long years till the second one would leave. Marla felt betrayed when Phil hesitated to follow through on their deal.

For his part, Phil felt torn. He knew he had made the promise to his wife, understood how much she had been awaiting this leaving home stage, but he felt an obligation to take Kristin home when she wanted to come home. Phil did not want her to feel rejected by him, especially after her mother had walked out of her life. And he wanted another chance to be a better parent, based on what he had learned in therapy. He wanted to make the summer period a healthier one in his relationship with his daughter, including starting with clear expectations that she would line up a job before coming home and would be a better citizen of the family. As he spoke, Phil got to his deepest fears in this situation: that he would lose his wife or hurt his daughter.

For me, at the end of a difficult but seemingly successful course of therapy, this was a most unwelcome impasse. A marriage that 4 weeks ago had been at its peak was not at its nadir. And they were looking to me to help them break the impasse at a time when I was prepared to make my good-byes. This kind of family-splitting dilemma did not come up in my training. It was not in the textbooks. I never saw it in a master video case. Then I thought, "This is a moral dilemma. I am supposed to know how to work with this kind of thing. This is my specialty." The self-talk didn't help. At the end of the session where all of this material came out, I ended lamely with something like "I feel your pain and why don't you keep talking about it." I hoped that in two weeks they

would make some progress on their own, because I was stumped.

Of course, the next time they were more dug into their positions. If Kristin returned home, Marla would feel deeply betrayed, fearful for her health, and probably leave the marriage. If Kristin did not return home, Phil would feel as if he had betrayed his daughter. Marla argued that Kristin would be better off living in an apartment near her college out of state, and that returning home would be a regression for her. So Marla did not believe she was asking her husband to betray his daughter. But Phil felt otherwise, and could not bring himself to turn his daughter down. Marla and Phil loved each other and had learned to resolve most of their conflicts. Neither of them seemed to welcome this impasse, or to be using it for leverage in the marriage.

At first, I saw myself as neutral about the decision on whether Kristin should be allowed home for the summer. I saw good arguments on both sides, and I helped each clarify both their positions and the feelings that underlay them. The heart of my model of moral consultation in therapy is to explore with clients their sense of the effects of their actions and decision on those involved. So I asked about the effects of a yes or no decision on Kristen, on Marla, on Phil, and on Nathan. As I listened, I reflected more on Kristin, especially her emotional fragility and her abandonment by her other parent. I heard more clearly Phil's belief that he wanted another chance to do better by her as her father. As I listened harder to Marla, I heard her fear of never having a marriage and household without an oppositional offspring present.

Given all of these complexities, I tilted the discussion towards finding a way for Kristin to come home for the summer and for Marla to not feel betrayed. I was no longer neutral because I believed that, in this case, Phil owed his daughter an open door this

summer, given her history and current fragility. So I introduced the "m" word--moral-- into the discussion by saying this to Phil: "Phil, if I am hearing you right, this comes down to a moral issue for you, that you cannot live with yourself as a parent if you turn her away this summer." Phil teared up, saying "Yes, it is, but I feel so terrible about hurting Marla by doing right by my daughter."

When I used the word "moral," Marla nearly jumped out of her seat. She could sense the tide turning, because her case was not based on something as lofty as conscience, but more on her own self-preservation. I was ready instantly to address her side. I said, "And for you, Marla, I don't think this is really about whether you can survive the summer emotionally and physically. You have survived the past three years, and you are a very resilient person. In fact, Kristin's behavior towards you is better than it has ever been. There is no doubt in my mind that you can handle the stress of a summer stay. What I sense is that the deeper issue is twofold: whether you can trust your husband to keep his word, and whether you can have any hope for a time when there are not children in the household, a time when you can feel the home is yours and your husband's."

They were both listening carefully now. I went on to take even more focus off the summer decision, saying to Phil, "If I were Marla, I would wonder if you will ever be able to say no to one of your children who wants to move home. When they are 35 and would like a place to crash for a year or so to save money, could you turn them down? Can Marla ever count on a time when it will be just the two of you?" Marla interjected, "Yes, that's the main point. It is not mainly about this summer. It's about what this summer means for the future, about whether I can count on you to set limits on your children's

role in our marriage."

Notice in this interaction that after using terms that elicited and validated Phil's moral position on the decision, and thereby clearly moving my weight to his side, I immediately sided with Marla on what I thought were her deep and legitimate concerns. I introduced moral terms--trust and betrayal--on Marla's side, giving her credit for more than blatant self-interest. But I defocused the issue away from the summer into their overall marital contract for the present of children in their lives.

The challenge about the long term moved Phil to affirm that he would never tolerate a willy-nilly use of the home by his adult children, and that he too looked forward to being just a couple. It was just this summer, he said, that he felt he could not say "no" to, given Kristin's ambivalence about leaving home and her experience with her mother.

When Marla, with less conviction this time, repeated her view that it would be best for Kristin to not come home, I offered my own opinion about Kristin's needs. I said that the first summer home after leaving for college was a developmentally unique time. Many young people need to know there is a home to return to before they really try their wings. I told them that I have seen parents make the mistake of turning the children's bedroom in a den the day they leave for college. One divorced parent I know did that and her daughter never stayed a night in her mother's house again, preferring to stay in her old room at her father's house. Furthermore, from what I knew of Kristin and her first year at college, she was still working through her angry dependence on her father, and would take a "no" as a powerful rejection.

Notice here that I was tilting again towards Phil's position, so I quickly affirmed Marla's perspective by challenging Phil: "What I hear from you, Phil, is that you don't

want her to come home for business as usual, but that you are going to use this summer to work on your relationship with your daughter, including her contributions to the morale of everyone in the household." Phil repeated his wish to have one more try at being a different parent to Kristin, and his determination to do it better.



With the impasse softening but no solution emerging, I made a cautious proposal for them to think about, something that carried risks for both of them. For this summer, they would agree that Phil could make the decision about whether Kristin could come home, but in the future, it would require two votes: Phil's and Marla's. Marla immediately liked the idea, saying that she would not use her "veto" unless she thought the children were using the household for a revolving door. Phil said he would not want a revolving door either, and that he looked forward to being alone as a couple. But he proposal was scary to him, and he needed time to think about it.

When we met for our final session, Phil announced he had agreed with the proposal, and that coming to place this kind of trust in Marla had led to a breakthrough in their relationship. Marla herself was beaming, although Kristin was going to come home for the summer, because she felt the partnership was restored. I told them how relieved I was, and how worried I had been for them and for Kristin. In the moments of celebration at the end of the session, I also told them that I was relieved that a year's worth of effort on my part did not go down the toilet! I scolded them in jest for making me work so hard at the end of therapy.

This family had nearly fractured over conflicting loyalties. I saw Kristin as the most vulnerable stakeholder, and so I influenced the decision so as not to compromise her well being. I also supported Phil's moral sense that he could not betray his daughter's fundamental needs, even to save his marriage. And I supported Marla's stake in being able to have a say in the future composition of her household and being able to hope realistically for a post-parental phase of family life.

I don't usually propose a specific resolution of clients' moral dilemmas, but in this case the proposal came to me and I thought they could use something specific to think about. I was not attached to this particular way to resolve the impasse. But I was attached to the idea of preserving the marriage if possible, protecting Kristin, and helping both adults meet their needs and keep their integrity. No wonder I was so relieved at the end, because the combination of those outcomes is not easy to achieve in any family, let alone a stepfamily.

As therapists, we encounter stepfamily loyalty dramas such as Phil's and Marla's and Kristen's during a single act or scene. But for the families themselves, of course, the play goes on. Sometimes remarried couples expect that the curtain will close on their moral drama of divided loyalties and divergent commitments when the last child leaves home. Not so. Imagine Phil and Marla, if they had not made a breakthrough on their parenting alliance but held on until 15-year-old Nathan left home. Witness the fight over his private college tuition, which Phil cannot pay alone without loans but which Marla is unwilling to contribute to because of Nathan's past behavior towards her. Marla argues that private college tuition, even paid for by Phil, will sap income needed for the rest of the family. State schools were good enough for her and Phil and Kristin, and should be good enough for Nathan. Phil wants the choice to be Nathan's, just as it was Kristin's. Fast forward another four years and the couple is arguing about Nathan's request to move home for a while after college.

When Kristin is 25, Phil and Marla fight over her wedding after Kristin's mother suddenly takes center stage again and Marla becomes an extra. In another dozen years, the struggle is be over estate planning--how much Phil leaves to his children versus Marla. If he leaves everything to his wife, he fears she will leave no money to his children. Laura in turn feels mistrusted and maligned, and cut out of her legitimate right to his full estate. And so it goes until death do they part--and beyond.

More than anything else, stepfamilies make us face the unpleasant truth that core goals of adults and children, and of husbands and wives, sometimes diverge in family life.

We want a divorce and our children want us to stay married to their parent. We want to remarry and our kids want us to stay single--or remarry our original spouse. We want to move to a new house not previously owned by either mate, and our children want to keep their old house, school, and neighborhood. We want to re-create an original, tightly bonded family, and the kids resent the intrusion of newcomers. We expect that stepfamily life will get better before long, and our teenagers are counting the months until they can move out. We want our new spouse to love our children the way we do, and they are also counting the years till the children leave home. When stepfamilies nevertheless succeed in creating a nurturing life together, as many ultimately do, it is a striking human achievement.

Conceived after a loss and born in a love affair that represents the renewal of hope for grownups but not for children, stepfamilies strive everyday to reconcile that which cannot be fully reconciled. I am reminded of the Spanish phrase about social revolution: "la lucha continua"--the struggle continues. Stepfamilies are the moral pioneers of contemporary family life, showing us all how to love and persevere in the face of loyalties that multiply and divide but never fully converge.

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William J. Doherty, Ph.D., is Professor and Director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Minnesota ([bdoherty@che.umn.edu](mailto:bdoherty@che.umn.edu)). He is author of Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart. (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).