In many ways this is a golden age for marital and couples therapy, with theory-based, empirically supported models that are accessible to practitioners for training and continuing education (Gurman, Lebow, & Snyder, 2015). Despite this flowering of the field, a specific type of clinical presentation continues to frustrate practitioners: couples in which one partner has a foot out the relationship door and is reluctant to do couples therapy, whereas the other partner is eager to do therapy to preserve the relationship (Crosby, 1989). We term these mixed-agenda couples—with one spouse leaning out and the other leaning in. In our experience as long-time clinicians and educators, they are a prominent and neglected group in couples therapy.

A mixed-agenda case from early in my career continues to haunt me (Bill Doherty).1 The wife, having emotionally withdrawn from the marriage, said she came to the first session at the request of her husband. He said he

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1All cases have been disguised to maintain client confidentiality.

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Helping Couples on the Brink of Divorce: Discernment Counseling for Troubled Relationships, by W. J. Doherty and S. M. Harris
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would do anything, make any change, to save his marriage. Not having any specific way to work with a couple like this, I did some history and assessment and then tried to forge an agreement to do couples therapy. The husband became increasingly somber as his wife expressed her doubts that therapy could change patterns that had been present for many years—and besides, she was tired of trying, although she had not decided on divorce. At the end of the session I told them I could help them preserve and improve their marriage if that was the help they wanted, or I could help them prepare for a constructive divorce if that was the route they chose. In retrospect, I was asking them to come to a joint decision in the face of polarized positions, and in particular, I was asking the wife to resolve her ambivalence on her own—so I could have a clear mandate for how to help them. We scheduled a second session, but the husband called to cancel, saying that his wife told him she had not found the session helpful. He sounded even more desperate, and I gave him a referral to another couples therapist. There is no way to know how therapy would have turned out with this couple if I had a better approach to working with them. (Some therapists urge mixed-agenda couples to sign up for a certain number of therapy sessions before deciding on divorce, but as we argue in this book, this approach does not necessarily meet the divergent needs of the two spouses.) What I did not have was a protocol for working with couples like this, one that does not assume the couple is there to improve their relationship in therapy or to move toward divorce, but rather helps them develop clarity and confidence about the next step for their relationship—whether to try to improve it in therapy or end it with divorce. This book offers such a protocol, called discernment counseling, which was developed 20 years ago as an informal clinical tool and then refined during the last 7 years into a structured protocol. Although we address theory and relevant research in this book, it is primarily a clinical guide to the strategies and craft of discernment counseling. The main audience is couples therapists (and students of couples therapy) because doing discernment counseling well requires skill in couples therapy. Part I of the volume describes the origins of discernment counseling; gives an overview of the approach; grounds it in a family dynamics model, contemporary adult attachment theory, and differentiation theory; and reviews new research on divorce and commitment ambivalence. Of particular importance is an understanding that the leaning-in and leaning-out spouses must be approached in different ways, mostly in individual conversations, because they are journeying through different emotional worlds. Part II drills down into the nuts and bolts of discernment counseling from the first contact to the ending session. We have learned that it takes practice for couples therapists to work within the short time frame (we designed discernment counseling with a five-session limit), to blend couple and individual
time in sessions, and to avoid sliding into doing therapy interventions without a contract for couples therapy. In that light, we continually return to the distinction between the goals of traditional couples therapy—to improve the relationship, promote emotional bonding, and solve or manage problems better—and the goals of discernment counseling—clarity and confidence about a direction for the marriage based on a deeper understanding of what has happened to the marriage and each person’s contributions to the problems. Discernment counseling ends not with a conclusion about whether the relationship has improved—that is not the goal—but with a decision to take one of three paths: to do couples therapy, to divorce, or to remain on hold for now.

Part III addresses several common scenarios encountered by discernment counselors: active affairs, which can be managed more readily in discernment counseling than in traditional couples therapy; one spouse being “out of love” and unmotivated to work on the relationship; neither spouse being clearly committed to work on the relationship; and how to switch from couples therapy to discernment counseling when it is clear that you are dealing with a mixed-agenda couple. On the last topic, we show how to switch from couples therapy to discernment counseling when divorce appears on the table during therapy, and then sometimes back to couples therapy when a divorce-ambivalent partner recommits to working on the relationship.

Part IV begins with a chapter on how to learn to do discernment counseling, which we believe is more challenging than it appears at first reading. One challenge is that a therapist has to unlearn some things, such as doing couple-level interventions, and another is to use a different structure for sessions than typical conjoint couples therapy. A subsequent chapter addresses critical incidents and times when it is important to diverge from the discernment counseling protocol. The real world is messier than any clinical protocol. The final chapter describes ways to build a practice around discernment counseling—for example, how to create a referral network and how to use a website to help clients understand this service and “prescreen” themselves.

In the Appendix we describe how divorce professionals and clergy can use elements of discernment counseling in their work and also make referrals to therapists for the full discernment counseling protocol. We have worked with collaborative divorce lawyers and family-oriented mediators for a number of years to develop a way for them to assess for divorce ambivalence and to encourage ambivalent clients to seek further help before making a final decision to divorce. Likewise, we have codeveloped a “pastoral discernment counseling” protocol with a group of clergy, consisting of one session (and a follow-up) that helps mixed-agenda couples slow down and consider their options, including couples therapy or the therapist version of discernment counseling.
Two notes about language: We have chosen to call this protocol dis-
cernment counseling rather than discernment therapy with full recogni-
tion that decades ago the field moved away from the term marriage counseling in
favor of marriage therapy and then couples therapy. Our reasoning is pragmatic:
We want to differentiate discernment from therapy, and we want to create a
low bar of entry for therapy-resistant leaning-out spouses who we think find
the term counseling less intense and therefore less threatening. We also use
the terms marriage and couple interchangeably, along with spouse and partner,
even though the field has moved away from the term marriage to be inclusive
of a variety of relationship types. Our reasoning: Because discernment coun-
seling is intended for couples (of any gender combination) who once made
a lifelong commitment to each other, we think marriage, spouse, and divorce
are appropriate terms to use in many instances, in combination with more
general terms such as couple, partner, and break up.

In writing the chapters for this book, we took an approach that could
be characterized as “say what you need to say, and finish.” Thus, some chap-
ters are fairly long, some are medium size, and a few are brief. In terms of
accessing the book, we suggest reading Chapters 1 to 8 in sequence and then
reading the other chapters in any order. The cases described come from our
Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project; clients have given permission for
their disguised stories to be used for educational purposes. We are grateful to
them and our colleague Bridget Manley Mayer, the project coordinator, for
her important contributions to the development of discernment counseling.

An often overlooked aspect of couples therapy is that there are always
two commitment issues on the table whenever a couple comes for therapy:
their commitment to the relationship and their commitment to healing their
relationship in therapy. In other words, are they going to stay together and
are we going to work together? The couples we see in discernment counsel-
ing are considering tickets for different destinations for their marriage, and
one spouse is reluctant to do therapy altogether. One may be experiencing
an attachment wound after being threatened with divorce—and is acting out
accordingly. The other is often desperate to be free, or guilty and responsible
for threatening to break up a family. Both may have experienced failure in
previous couples therapy. Their kids are shaken, and their families and friends
are taking sides. They fear both the hurricane of divorce and the quicksand
of a bad marriage. With so much at stake, we owe them a well-articulated
approach for helping, a method that can be elaborated, taught, evaluated,
and improved over time. Being able to offer them this underscores our ethical
commitment to their well-being. This book is our contribution to that goal.