

PREFACE

I have been working with difficult divorces in therapy for 40 years. I came to working with difficult divorce somewhat by happenstance, without the careful preparation that I recommend in this book. I was a director of clinical services, and one of the families seen in our clinic was embroiled in a dispute about custody and visitation centered on whether a parent should have access to the children. The other parent was highly politically connected and represented by one of the most aggressive family attorneys in the country. Amid threats of lawsuits, I, bravely and naively (with my only background in this area being therapy with high-conflict families and having done several child custody evaluations), took over the treatment of the case. All the work surrounding the case was highly acrimonious. A private investigator followed me for a few days, with a primary goal of being intimidating. Ultimately, there were mandated appearances in court in relation to this case, a trying cross-examination, and the very unusual outcome in court of the attorneys for one side being fined and sanctioned for their behavior. Somehow, the therapy did help the family make progress in moving out of the most dysfunctional range to more ordinary negative feelings, although being a therapist in this case was very stressful.

One might think that this experience would have driven me away from any future contact with such cases. Most therapy is simpler, involves more connection, and is more personally satisfying. However, this experience, and others like it soon after (albeit ones somewhat less dramatic), opened a new vista for me. These were families in great pain, as much so as any I had seen. Narratives were incredibly powerful; clearly, each parent and child believed wholeheartedly in the radical (and often dysfunctional) positions they were verbalizing. The patterns of systemic problem maintenance I had learned about in postgraduate training in family systems were dramatically evident. Most often, one person's bad behavior begat another person's worse behavior and so on, and those efforts that did appear on someone's part to act better were ignored. And, so often, the family members described being caught up in a Kafkaesque legal system in which they were relentlessly misconstrued and under attack, with appearances in court at random intervals where sometimes something happened and sometimes nothing occurred. Most of all, there were the children in these families, almost all of whom were deeply wounded and often troubled. It struck me that the conflict in these families represented a major public health problem; toxic effects were ever-present for almost everyone involved.

Thus, I wanted to see whether there were ways that therapists might better help these families and the individuals in them. What soon became clear was that many of the typical ways of approaching families and individuals in therapy were not well suited to these families. Therapists even became ensnared in the pathogenic process as they offered support that likely would have helped in some other context but served to enable their clients in their difficult behaviors. Over time, I developed ways of working with these families and individuals better suited to the task.

Many years later, I also went through a divorce. This provided a much different perspective about such conflicts. Although my own divorce was mostly cooperative and would qualify as a "good divorce," the vortex of feelings during that process was powerful. Going through divorce also forces one to place oneself in the powerful evolving dialogue about the place of divorce in our society. My personal experience prompted a great deal of further thinking and learning from the writing and research of others about divorce. This, in turn, led to additional questions about the families and individuals experiencing difficult divorce who are the focus of this book. What is different about these families from most families that manage their way through such challenging times? Even more important, are there ways to help reduce the enormous damage to all involved?

In my research for this book, I discovered how few books are written about therapy with divorcing individuals, couples, and families (even though 40% to 50% of couples in the Western world divorce; Cherlin, 2009) compared

with the many books written about couple therapy and other problems that affect far fewer people. This book is designed to fill that void. A quick search on Amazon also reveals that there are several books about high-conflict divorce or divorce involving child custody and visitation issues for lay audiences and that many of those books actually serve to prompt greater conflict (e.g., with titles such as *How to Come Out Ahead in Your Custody Dispute*). I intend this book as an antidote to such writing and the forces that help move these families toward greater difficulties. Wise therapists can play a vital role in helping people move slowly and deliberately toward better solutions and mitigating the damage once such a systemic process is underway.

My thanks to Susan Reynolds, Elizabeth Budd, Elizabeth Brace, and Ida Audeh at the American Psychological Association, who patiently helped nurture this book into its present form.