

BETTER TOGETHER, Ferdig

Book Proposal

*Better Together: Renewing Our Lives, Organizations, and
Communities*

by

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Overview

This book is about communication, but not the way most people think of it.

Human communication is astonishingly complex, revealing what it means to be human. Everything we think, say, and do is communication, whether we're learning something new, forming opinions, ordering dinner, storming the capital, managing investments, or standing in a food line. We are, right now, co-creating the worlds in which we live. Yet, we give little attention to our interactions and ignore them at our peril.

Science tells us that communication—all forms of interaction—is how life creates and sustains itself. We homo sapiens are merely one among millions of species comprising the interconnected, interdependent web of life on earth. Though unlike our earthly co-inhabitants, we're endowed with superior cognitive abilities that enable us to notice—really pay attention to—exactly what our interactions co-create.

Since prehistoric times, we humans have created wonders through our interactions—beyond the wildest dreams of our cave-dwelling ancestors: from aircraft and air conditioning to skyscrapers and devices that extend our communication to the far corners of the earth.

Despite this awesome power, or maybe because of it, we've also made a mess of things through ignorance, greed, and carelessness. This book asks the question: How can we use our uniquely human abilities to co-create, through everyday communication, the best of all possible worlds—to generate the positive outcomes we desire?

Better Together offers a new way of thinking about and practicing constructive, purposeful communication called *generative communication*.

Generative communication means bringing something into existence, *together*, that advances our common interests. Those benefits can include a more informed understanding of complex issues, an appreciation for opposing points of view, and workable solutions to previously intractable problems.

But buyer beware. Generative processes come without an owner's manual. Prescriptions and models give us a useful point of departure, but they're a compass, not a roadmap. *Better*

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Together gives us keys to the machinery but it's up to us to *use* them to unlock the future. Dr. Ferdig shows us how to use our head, heart, and intuition to watch, learn, and experiment as we build our collective competence for communicating generatively in every facet of life.

This book challenges anyone who genuinely cares about the well-being of our world—regardless of background or ideology—to make generative communication a top priority of day-to-day existence. Generative communication is *not* rocket science. It requires only a willingness to try, to take responsibility for our choices, and to re-evaluate long-standing beliefs and assumptions that may no longer hold true.

Marketing Strengths

Better Together joins a select group of successful, thought-provoking works that show how we think and talk about our world changes its reality.

Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts (Brene Brown, Random House, 2018). A NYT best seller and Amazon best seller in popular social psychology, leadership & motivation, and transformative self-help, Brown's advice to leaders echoes the philosophy of *Better Together* but overlooks the power of generative communication.

Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit (Parker Palmer, Jossey-Bass, 2011). Palmer has sold over 1.5 million books, translated into ten languages. This book, an Amazon best seller in civics & citizenship and democracy, reinforces the value of authentic, purposeful communication in a political context. Going further, *Better Together* reaches a larger general audience seeking to recover the essence of democracy through generative participation—people, often with radically different viewpoints, interacting respectfully to achieve mutually-satisfactory outcomes.

The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion (Jonathan Haidt, Vintage, Random House, 2012). A NYT best seller and ranked first by Amazon best sellers in evolutionary psychology, Haidt describes the history of perceived intuition-based reality over reasoning-based morality that divides people by religion and political party. He makes the case that if people understand the moral foundation of their beliefs, they might disagree more constructively. *Better Together*, takes this a step further by providing keys to both explore what's underneath our beliefs and assumptions and to disagree constructively through generative communication.

Thinking, Fast and Slow (Daniel Kahneman, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). Also a NYT best seller, Kahneman describes our thinking minds as two systems: creative shortcut thinking that requires little effort but often results in errors, and more deliberate thinking that results in useful, long-lasting outcomes. *Better Together* picks up where Kahneman leaves off, providing concrete ways to deliberately challenge our habitual thinking with real evidence, thus enhancing our problem-solving interactions while consciously making room for creative thinking.

Better Together: Renewing Our Lives, Organizations, and Communities is designed to appeal to a values-driven audience with a diverse range of backgrounds and interests, from school teachers, college students, community organizers, and activists to elected officials, socially conscious business leaders, and consumers. Their common denominator is a desire to make a meaningful difference, to improve outcomes that affect everyday life at home, in the workplace, and in communities around the world.

About the Author

Mary A. Ferdig, Ph.D. is a leadership and organizational development (OD) consultant, teacher, communication scholar, author, and student of life. She is currently President and CEO of the Sustainability Leadership Institute, a nonprofit that provides leadership education and support.

Dr. Ferdig grew up on a farm and married her high school homecoming date. Together they have four children and 11 grandchildren.

She earned her B.S. (1980) and M.A. (1985) in communication studies and psychology at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, and her Ph.D. (2001) in organizational development and change at Benedictine University, Chicago. She is a scholar-practitioner in leadership and OD, with an emphasis on communication interaction, and conducted field research in the U.S. and Canada for 25 years before co-founding the Sustainability Leadership Institute in 2004.

Her writings and publications include a master's thesis on transactional negotiation, a doctoral dissertation on the sociology of self-directed change, and chapters contributed to *Research in Organization Change and Development*, 2005 and *Encyclopedia of the World's Biomes*, 2019, as well as numerous articles, presentation proceedings, and white papers. [Publications](#)

Dr. Ferdig uses a variety of avenues to communicate with her audiences in the U.S., Canada, and abroad. Her platform includes a regularly updated contact database of 6,000 contacts, contributions to several social media sites, both an individual and organizational website (each with a link to previous publications), as well as personal and professional relationships cultivated over many years with clients, students, scholars, consultants, thought leaders, and community activists. She is known and respected for her expertise in leadership and OD with particular skills in organizational change facilitation, and conflict resolution.

Ferdig's website—[Mary A. Ferdig, Ph.D.](#)—attracts readers curious about generative communication, her publications, and the services she offers. Thousands of visitors subscribe to her newsletter (circulation: 6,000 and growing), which highlights new developments in the field, provocative observations, compelling stories, book reviews, and announcements about her upcoming publications.

As President and CEO of the [Sustainability Leadership Institute](#) (SLI), Ferdig and her collaborators work side-by-side with people committed to leading the way toward sustainable positive outcomes in their workplaces and communities. [ACM Marketing](#) developed and manages a comprehensive social media strategy to expand the market for Ferdig's ideas to build generative workplaces and communities around the world. At present, Ferdig's social media accounts feature 1,257 friends on [Facebook](#), 2,582 contacts on [LinkedIn](#), and 257 followers on [Twitter](#). ACM's strategy and marketing skills promise to grow these numbers exponentially.

Ferdig's 2021 promotional schedule includes an interview with Charle Peck, host of the [Advancing Humanity Podcast](#) with over 1500 subscribers. She is scheduled to present "Co-creating Sustainable Solutions with Generative Communication," as well as participate in a follow-up panel, at the September 13 & 14, 2021 online International Sustainatopia Conference, [Smart City World](#); 250 people from the U.S. and Europe are currently registered. Ferdig will also speak at the Nov 8-10, 2021 [International Conference on Cell Science & Molecular Biology](#) in

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Rome, Italy with anticipated attendance of 1200 people from around the world. Her presentation, “Generative Interactions among Humans,” is based on a chapter she contributed to the *Encyclopedia of World Biomes* published by Elsevier Press in 2019.

Ferdig is currently registered with several national and local speaker’s bureaus: [National Speakers Bureau](#), [National Speakers Association](#), and [Midwest Speakers Bureau](#).

Ferdig is actively engaged with numerous professional and community organizations, including [Art of Hosting Collaboration \(International\)](#); [Business Ethics Alliance](#) (Omaha, NE); [Complexity Management Centre](#) (Hereford University, UK); [Global Partners in Hope](#) (Omaha, NE); [ICAN Global](#) (Omaha, NE); [Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Communities](#) (Lincoln, NE); [Millennium Alliance for Humanity & the Biosphere](#) (Stanford University, CA); [National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation](#) (National); [OD Network](#) (Omaha, NE); [Pachamama Alliance](#) (San Francisco, CA); [Plexus Institute](#) (Washington, DC); [Presencing Institute](#) (Boston, MA); [Tri-faith Initiative](#) (Omaha, NE).

ACM Marketing will initiate, in collaboration with [Thumos](#), local (Omaha World Herald, Des Moines Register, Kansas City Star) and national (WSJ, NYT, LA Times) press releases and articles promoting *Better Together* in conjunction with its publication.

Delivery

A manuscript of approximately 350 pages (with bibliography and resource appendix) will be delivered within six months of a timely publisher’s contract.

Illustration Plan

Dr. Ferdig will provide tables of supporting data plus original line drawings and half-tone illustrations of concepts related to, and clarifying Generative Communication such as complex process interactions and fractal patterns.

Book Contents

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1	Ten Keys to Generative Communication
2	Embracing the Complexity of Life
3	The Art of Awareness
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12	Everyday Communication
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Synopsis

Introduction: Communication and Community

Better Together brings to life an expanded way of thinking about human communication that most of us don't ever consider. *Generative communication*, an idea that was simmering long before it had a name, means thinking that what we say and do in all our interactions *matters*. It reminds us that we construct realities through communication and therefore bear responsibility for the consequences, good and bad. While we've accomplished a lot since cavemen walked the earth, it's easy to spot cracks in the veneer. Many of us are stuck in old ways of thinking and communicating that limit our ability to work out differences and put "common" back in community. Generative communication creates an expanded understanding of problems, and workable solutions to them—all for our common good. It's time we sit up, pay attention and make ourselves accountable for the consequences of our interactions. Communication *is* community!

1 Ten Keys to Generative Communication

To generate is to create. To communicate is to build community. *Generative communication* means we turn our old ideas about communication on its head. When we touch others, it sparks a chain reaction of ideas—an adventure everyone shares, a door to the future with many keys. None of the keys is a master key, just as all—taken together—open every conceivable lock. At its heart, generative communication is a call for action that relies on our awareness and common sense for its success.

Each of the ten keys presented in this book represents one aspect of our life experiences. The locks they open reveal new worlds of learning, cooperation, collaboration, and growth. It's an amazing adventure you don't want to miss.

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2 Embracing the Complexity of Life

The first key gives us access to generative communication. It unlocks the worldview that our everyday cultural norms and dominant ways of thinking and behaving may be lagging behind reality. I discovered the complexity of life unfolding growing up on an Iowa farm, occasionally disrupted by drought and hardship. The interdependent relationships of a farmer, livestock, crops, and rainfall were palpable. My sisters and I helped Dad with chores and Mom prepare meals of the meat and vegetable we produced. Best of all, I got to drive the tractor when the neighbors helped out during hay harvesting time. I discovered that hard work, laughter, and conserving what we had were part of the infinite complexity of the human interactions that sustained us.

This complexity forms the heart of generative communication. Among these factors are disruptions of accepted patterns, self-organizing (sometimes erratic) movement and change, limitations of our ability to control and predict events, and the charm of paradox. While disruption can cause chaos, it can also prompt much-needed change. If you want to experience true complexity, just spend a day on a farm!

3 The Art of Awareness

Active awareness is the second key to generative communication and it occurs on many levels. Knowing what's happening in your current interactions is a critical component, but it's not the only one. Awareness of yourself, including your lifeview and essential values, is a precursor to positive, synergistic change. You must also pay attention to the observable facts of a situation and take the informed perspectives and potential motivations of others into account. Enhanced awareness on all these fronts is one of the hidden treasures of generative communication.

4 Learning How to Learn

Human beings can't help but learn, just as we can't help but communicate, and do both until the day we die. Generative communicators ask: *What* am I learning? *How* am I learning? What do I *do* with what I've learned?

Curiosity is our best teacher. We're all born to ask questions, then learn from the answers. Over time, we experiment with new ways of thinking—even radical ideas—then adjust our behavior until we find what works. We learn by doing, by formal and informal education, and by examining perspectives of those we don't agree with. Sometimes we need to *unlearn* assumptions and beliefs that no longer work—not an easy thing to do.

Critical thinking, now taught in classrooms from K-12 to universities, is one facet of communicating generatively. It encourages us to detect, disregard, or modify any overstatements and unsubstantiated claims we make ourselves or hear from others. It keeps us aware of *what is going on* (WIGO) and the universe of options available in every moment.

5 Lifeview Limitations

“Lifeview” is a person's unique perspective. Unlike one's fingerprints, lifeviews can change continuously. They're derived from a unique set of life experiences coupled with our individual genetic makeup. Included in our lifeview is the societal worldviews we've consciously or unconsciously adopted along the way.

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Our lifeview—and the beliefs and assumptions they incorporate—filters everything that reaches our mind and triggers our emotions. Information that reinforces our lifeview makes it increasingly inflexible unless we work to keep our minds and feelings open, while appreciating and interacting generatively with the lifeviews held by others. We must continually examine the beliefs embedded in our own lifeview and the worldviews buried in our culture. Our lifeviews inform the pictures of “what is so” in our minds and from these pictures, we impute meaning to our interactions.

6 Illusions of Grandeur

Navigating complexity flies in the face of our learned desire for control, stability, and predictability. Letting go of illusions that reinforce traditional worldviews requires us to separate wish from reality and trade certainty for possibility.

One illusion is our reliance on what we call “systems.” Many of us refer to organizations, institutions, and economies as systems. When problems arise we often diagnose them as systems or systemic problems, when, in fact, the concept of “system” itself is artificial. It’s used by scientists and analysts to describe a collection of interactive processes among people with a shared identity. Generative communication deliberately avoids the systems metaphor, focusing instead on the complex *processes* of human interaction that create both problems and solutions.

Systems thinking encourages people to assume they can stand outside these interactions even when they are a part of them. From this illusory perch, they presume an “objective” point of view which encourages them to analyze, diagnose, intervene, or otherwise try to control the people participating in the processes. This almost always produces unsustainable results. On the other hand, natural group dynamics produce a sort of self-organizing control that, paradoxically, both enables and regulates radical change among people. The results may be substantial, but they are seldom neatly “systematic.” To know the score, you must play the game and keep your eye on the ball!

7 Differences Spark Change

Too often, we treat differences or competing views with contempt. Generative communication challenges these habits by bringing a genuinely collaborative approach to our shared reality. This process involves consciously listening to and internalizing the perspectives of others.

Today’s world is rife with conflict. Finding ways to respectfully but honestly confront our differing views means *learning* from one another, *expanding* our reference points and *finding* workable solutions that benefit our families, organizations, communities, and society as a whole.

8 Watch Your Language

Many of us forget that language *represents* reality and is *not* reality itself. Words, like other symbols, carry information, which is then filtered through each individual’s lifeview including cultural worldviews. Despite dictionary definitions, meanings reside in the mind of the people who read, speak, and hear them.

Nonetheless, language does a good job communicating *inflections* of meaning. The words and symbols we use create subtle distinctions in the realities we experience. Generative language helps us jointly figure out nuances in a particular situation, examine commonly-used figures of

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speech, rightsize grandiose claims, spot generalizations and omissions, and, of course, expose potential distortions, misinformation and even blatant lies. Our key here is to communicate as accurately as we can, owning our views and judgements by saying so, behaving in a straightforward manner, and getting to the point—all while respecting others and acknowledging our shared circumstances and concerns.

9 Shall We Dance?

As Heraclitus reminds us, “The only constant in life is change.” These changes occur naturally in response to our evolving circumstances and the uncertainty they produce. They call attention to the changing rhythms of the interactions that inform our lives and the life of our society.

A spiral sketch illustrates the experience of dancing to the rhythms of change. These rhythms include *flowing* (experiencing the expected), *staccato* (experiencing disorientation and resistance), *chaos* (experiencing disruption and turbulence), *lyric* (noticing what’s new), and *stillness* (the repose of purpose and meaning) that inevitably returns to flow.

The idea of dancing with change, rather than resisting it, contradicts our typical models for initiating planned change. Theorists and practitioners often talk about *transformational* change, orders of change, group-inspired change, individual change, organizational change, and leading change—and these are just the beginning. These models reveal assumptions of control and predictability that often fail the test of reality. It’s a ritual dance consultants, managers, and change agents perform without partners, in the dark, ignorant of the human rhythms that really count.

10 Living in Integrity

Integrity and ethical behavior are key to generative communication. Can we be believed and trusted? Do our actions match our words? We’re surrounded by ethical dilemmas every day and sometimes our own contradictions trip us up. We profess the importance of truth-telling while ignoring the dishonesty of people who help a cause we favor. We experience such contradictions in others as hypocrisy, but we seldom apply those same standards to ourselves. We rationalize the things we choose to do and say. Add to our clever rationalizations the paradoxes of living with complexity and we find there is *only one person* we can rely on to guide us through our ethical dilemmas. That person is ourself.

Finding and nurturing integrity requires reflective responses to simple questions: Who am I? What do I stand for? What do I expect of myself? Do I seek and appreciate those qualities in others? Living in integrity means reminding ourselves that honesty is not only the best policy, it is a way of life.

11 Who’s Your Manager?

Complex interactions defy outside control. In fact, the only thing we can reliably control is ourselves. This is why active awareness and self-control are crucial to generative communication.

Listening and observing (WIGO—what is going on) in the here and now, including what *you* are thinking, feeling, saying, and doing gives you time to make necessary adjustments. Consciously choose your words and actions. Don’t let them “just happen.” Manage your ego, maintain empathy, hold yourself accountable, avoid reflexive reactions, and simply be yourself.

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12 Everyday Communication

Generative communication requires consciously considering, managing, and adapting our communication to fit a particular situation. These include circumstances in our personal and family life, organizational life, community, and those with whom we communicate nationally and globally. For many, this includes the over-arching goal of promoting an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling, and socially just human presence on the planet—but these and other miracles have to start with us.

Generative communication reflects Martin Buber’s idea of “walking the narrow ridge.” That means standing your ground while making room for others, including a community, a society, and individuals with comparable or contrasting lifeviews informing their unique or shared beliefs.

Epilogue: Renewing Ourselves and Generating Life

A pivotal point in my own life came when I worked to recover myself from a traumatic brain injury and find a new normal in my self-understanding, my interactions with others, and my acceptance of an unpredictable reality. That experience continues to reinforce my belief that we humans possess great power. Self-awareness, practiced and shared, can generate new possibilities *together* to cope with whatever challenges we face. Complexity and change are more than the rhythms of life, they are our endless fountains for renewal.

Sample chapters are available on request.