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# Brother and sister act

Close brother-sister relationships have a unique quality which can be a model for our dealings with the world, says psychoanalyst Lara Newton. A sibling relationship is also likely to be the longest we will know, she tells PETER CUNNINGHAM.



Sibling camaraderie: Dermot Bolger, the youngest of four children, with sister and fellow writer June Considine. Photograph: Alan Betson

IN 1977, WHEN she was 27 years old and a graduate student of English literature, Lara Newton flew from Colorado to Ireland and enrolled in the Yeats Summer School in Sligo. “I had already been in love with the literature of Ireland,” she says. “I then fell in love with the country.”

Thirty-two years later, Newton, a Jungian analyst, is back in Ireland to lecture for the Irish Analytical Psychology Association (Iapa), the representative body in Ireland for Jungian psychology .

Author of an influential book, **Brothers and Sisters: Discovering the Psychology of Companionship**, she says a sibling relationship is likely to be the longest one we ever know.

As a student of English, Newton was struck by the “incredible brother-sister collaborators” she found in literature, including the Wordsworths, Brontës and Lambs. In fictional brothers and sisters, she points to the “touching connections” between Ebenezer and Fannie Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* and between Holden Caulfield and Phoebe in *The Catcher in the Rye* .

“I love the brother-sister relationship in *The Children of Lir* ,” she says. “They support each other through hardship over centuries. It is a beautiful story of the bond between siblings.”

The subject of Newton’s thesis for her English literature masters degree in 1979 was Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. “I am inspired by the story, or maybe legend, that Joyce’s sister, Eileen, rescued *Portrait* from the fire where Joyce flung it in a fit of rage,” she says.

Newton says bonds between children and their parents are characterised by authority coming down from the older generation, or “individual authority”.

Brothers and sisters, on the other hand, learn how to take authority and share it. “The significance of this type of experience between brother and sister is that it gives us a sense of working with, not for the other,” she says. “Mutual authority makes for better marriages, business partnerships and world leaders, not to mention friendships in general.”

NEWTON’S MEMORIES OF growing up in North Carolina with her brother, John, older than her by two years, powerfully underpins her perspective. “My brother and I were never ‘exactly alike’, but what we had together is mutuality of trust, a sense of believing in each other,” she says.

Even when she was an infant her mother reported John looking out for her, comforting her when she cried. “As children, we thought very highly of each other’s abilities. We encouraged each other. It wasn’t that my parents didn’t . . . but I believed my brother more. More than any other relationship, it made me what I am today.”

Newton brings these childhood experiences to her work as an analyst. “I most often relate to my clients with sister energy,” she says. “We’re in this together, and I walk beside, not in front of my clients.”

People know their brothers and sisters long before they meet a partner or spouse, and they will usually know them long after their parents are gone. It is normal, then, in a wider context, for people to apply their sibling relationships to what they find when they go out into the world and make their separate lives.

When individuals venture into new territory, in situations where co-operation is essential for survival and success, they often call each other “brother” and “sister”. Newton points to the civil rights movement in the US and the hippie movement of the 1960s as examples where co-operation and companionship were valued higher than competition and supremacy.

Newton believes that the traditional competition culture fostered in the US can lead to conflict and discord. “Harmony and equanimity are undervalued in the world at large,” she says. “[t]he competitive spirit is encouraged far more than compromise. In fact, often, compromise is looked at as ‘losing’ or ‘giving up’. Young children, however, have both the capacity for co-operation and competition.”

She sees evidence of the energy of the “brother-sister archetype” in the governing style of Barack Obama.

“His desire to communicate, even with the opposing political party, with hostile governments, and to compromise . . . you’d think he had read my book!” she says.

*Lara Newton will lecture tonight at 8pm, and hold a seminar tomorrow from 10am to 1pm, at the Milltown Institute, Sandford Road, Dublin 6. For further details, see [www.jungireland.com](http://www.jungireland.com). Her book, *Brothers and Sisters: Discovering the Psychology of Companionship*, is published by Spring Journal Books, \$24.95*