

*READING FOR RELATION: WRITING FOR INSIGHT
WORKSHOP RESOURCES*

*SIBLINGS
Our First Macrocosm*



A Wising Up Anthology

Wising Up Press
www.universaltable.org



INTRODUCTION

READING FOR RELATION, WRITING FOR INSIGHT

We developed these workshop materials to encourage people who find the *Siblings: Our First Macrocosm* anthology of particular interest and want to explore the topic of sibling relationships and its personal implications more thoroughly through conversations or writing or both. We see our Wising Up Anthologies as catalysts for broader conversations and deeper insights into areas of broad social interest and concern.

What can we discuss through the mysterious mediation of a book that we cannot do directly? Sometimes identifying with the multiple authors in a book, in all their variety, may open up new perspectives, allowing us to understand and explore something about ourselves and our own lives more fluidly and thoroughly than we would be able to in any other way. Hearing someone else do the same opens up fresh possibility of relation in the here and now and also with our past.

We also encourage readers to explore writing for insight, as the contributors to the anthology have done themselves. Using some of the essential dynamics and craft of creative story-making to reconsider our own lives and relationships can help us move safely from rigid scripts and roles to more complex and generous understandings that are unique to our own circumstances and temperament.

WAYS TO USE THESE MATERIALS

What We Have Here:

Following the thematic structure of *Siblings: Our First Macrocosm*, we have suggested some reading selections from each

section because they provide good ways to discuss interesting issues common to many sibling relationships, but we encourage you to read the whole anthology and select freely because there are many excellent, evocative contributions that should inspire interesting discussions.

We have provided questions for each selection that include some about the piece itself and others that invite us to share our own experiences with the same issue.

In each section, we follow the questions with a writing exercise that allows us to move deeper into the issue if we wish.

We have intentionally included more material than you can use in any one, or even several, workshops because we believe in abundance and choice!

HOW TO SELECT MATERIALS FOR YOUR WORKSHOP

Our first suggestion is that you trust your own preferences. The workshop is for you as well as others and the more you are engaged, the more others will find it engaging.

Workshop Focus: Decide if you want to focus on just reading, or writing, or some combination of the two. You may also look at these materials and decide you just want to use them by yourself as prompts for private exploration.

Theme: Choose one or two of the five themes to focus on: World; Bonds & Bounds; Brothers, Sisters, Keepers; Discovery; or Loss.

Readings: Within the themes you've selected, choose the selections that most interest you and that you most want to explore with others. (You could also choose works from elsewhere in the anthology, ones we've identified or ones that you discover yourself, that expand the theme in ways that interest you.)

Length of workshop: Depending on the length of the meeting, choose the number of selections you think can comfortably be discussed in that time period. Remember, you want enough time to get to know each other. Two hours is probably a good estimate for a discussion group. A combination conversation and writing for insight workshop could be longer because of the shift in focus.

For example, a four-hour workshop combining conversation and writing could include two hours of discussion of selections from the anthology using the questions provided here, then, after a break, an hour of self-reflective writing using one of the writing prompts, followed by some sharing of that writing in pairs or as a group.

Stand Alone or Series: If you feel your interest is more sustained than one workshop, you could organize a series of meetings in which you explore different themes. Several people could help facilitate, choosing the themes that spoke to them most for their session.

HELP AND ENCOURAGEMENT ARE AVAILABLE

We're fond of this anthology and want to share our enthusiasm and experience. All of us have siblings so we have a personal interest in the topic. Editing the anthology and developing these materials, we have done among ourselves some of the same kinds of listening, sharing, and personal exploration we're encouraging you to try and have found it illuminating and, most importantly, fun. Don't hesitate to get in touch with us.

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OVERVIEW

Our experience of our siblings shifts dramatically when we move from the understanding and expectations we have built up from what we know experientially of them as unique individuals to trying to fit them within the lens of a word such as sister, brother. It is interesting to note the movement between these two ways of knowing and how they inform the various conflicts—and resolutions—between siblings that you find in these stories, poems and memoirs—and in your own lives.

I. WORLD

The works in this section are particularly evocative of the sensory dimensions of sibling relationships, whether in early childhood or adulthood—what it looked, tasted, sounded, felt like to be inside that macrocosm.

Suggested Readings:

Laura Apol, <i>Twin Sister, Stillborn</i>	24
Julie Preis, <i>Center of Attention, Best Behavior, Togetherness, Third and Eleventh</i>	28
Steve Koppman, <i>Morning Again</i>	33
Rose Hamilton-Gottlieb, <i>Favorite Son</i>	46
Brian Burns, <i>Half Hearted</i>	57
Loretta Diane Walker, <i>Candidate for Statistics</i>	65
Patti See, <i>Like Me Best</i>	70

1. Laura Apol's earliest macrocosm was the womb she shared with her stillborn twin. Apol's birthdate was her sister's death date. How does Apol's naming of her sister decades later create for her a conscious macrocosm to hold the unconscious shaping of this early experience? *In your family was there a miscarried or stillborn child who is still part of your family constellation?*

2. In the poems *Center of Attention, Best Behavior, Togetherness*, and

Third and Eleventh, Julie Preis explores various tensions and gifts of being one of a large tribe of children in a constantly changing constellation. How do the children become a world unto themselves, and how do their experiences of each other prepare them for the larger world? Do Preis's responses in these poems match or challenge your assumptions of the responses of an older child in a very large family? *How did your own placement (or changes in your placement) in your sibling constellation shape your expectations of your place in the larger world?*

3. In *Morning Again*, Steve Koppman writes about a young boy haunted by unspeakable sibling rivalry. Since his mother gave birth, he feels it has been "disaster after disaster," that all the rules have changed and his old world is like "a good dream from long ago." The story captures well the for-all-time quality of childhood events. What shift goes on between the boy and his little sister that begins to reshape his macrocosm more positively? *Were there moments in your own growing up when you felt all the rules had changed and thought you would never feel comfortable again? Did relations with a sibling begin to reshape your world in a more positive direction?*

4. In her story *Favorite Son*, Rose Hamilton-Gottlieb describes in vivid and loving detail life on a farm for an eleven-year-old boy, Willie, who is old enough to understand that this macrocosm is both precious and endangered—not just by outside forces but also by energies within the family. His father stands between him and the possible loss of the farm, but Willie comes to understand that he must serve a similar function, protecting his younger brother Stefan from their father. How do Willie's own actions help to preserve the world he loves so much and to convey its value to his younger brother? How does his father's kindness to him allow Willie to protect his younger brother from their father's intolerance? How much does the bond between the brothers shape a macrocosm for them that is quite different from the one Willie shared with his father? *Have you ever been in a position where you were drawing on kindnesses you have received from a parent to help create a more positive world for one of your more disfavored siblings? Has a sibling done this for you?*

5. In *Half Hearted*, Brian Burns describes the macrocosm his older half-sisters create with and for him as a young man. How does their whole-hearted acceptance of him, which includes an unconflicted acceptance of his sexual orientation, shape his understanding of his place in the world? How has his understanding of them as women shaped his understanding of the larger world as well? Does the title reflect the disconnect between the names the world gives some of our relationships and our experience of those relationships? Do you think his understanding of that disconnect shifts in this story? *Are there "step" or "half" relationships you have that feel much richer than these words imply? How do you correct for the misperceptions implicit in the words themselves?*

6. In *Candidate for Statistics*, what kinds of expectations has the behavior of her brother built in Loretta Diane Walker? How does the last line of the poem expand those expectations, make them predictive in a way that challenges the worldview implicit in the oft-cited statistics that shape expectations for young black men outside their family macrocosm? What *are* the values her brother's behaviors demonstrate? Do those lived values both honor and critique the larger society? *Did your siblings, by their behaviors and choices, challenge some of the negative predications in the larger world around you? Was their example more powerful than statistics and broad social norms in setting your own aspirations? Did your behaviors do this for your siblings?*

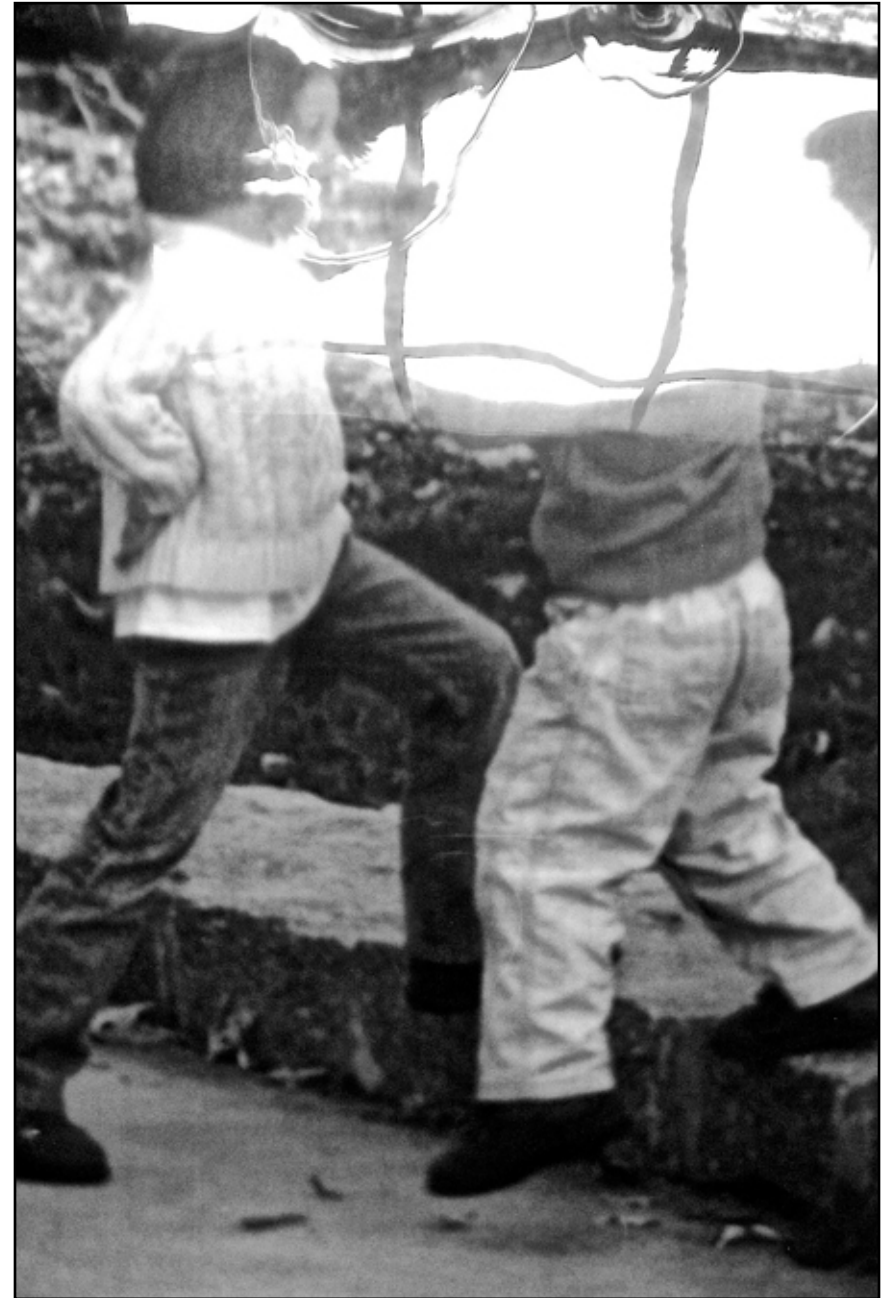
7. Humor is a powerful cohering force in Patti See's *Like Me Best*. How has the constant "likes me best" teasing helped them constructively negotiate the competition for parental attention common to a large family? How does the teasing among the adult siblings recreate a vital macrocosm for them all even as their mother is dying of dementia? Does the rapid flow of conversation have an effect that is greater than its content? *Can you think of moments in your own relations with adult siblings when the familiar flow of humor helped create a safe space even in difficult or tragic circumstances?* What is the role of See's blog in helping sustain a shared macrocosm? Does her need to keep it have something to do with being the youngest child, separated by some years from her

older siblings? *Who is the keeper-of-the-memories among your siblings?*

WRITING FOR INSIGHT: WORLD

Choose an image of you and your siblings in childhood that feels archetypal. Describe it as vividly as you can as if you were a movie director taking in the whole scene. What is the feeling the image evokes in you taken as a whole? What does it feel like as you write to be able to try and recreate for yourself and others the atmosphere of that present moment that felt so complete at the time?

Now, focus in more closely, concentrating sequentially on one individual or a couple. What are some of the snatches of dialogue you hear as you come near? What are some of the expressions you see crossing faces? What are some of the distinctive gestures? Actions? What is the quality of the feelings (fleeting, pleasant, anxious, continuous) that you feel as you focus closer? At this distance are you more aware as you write of different perspectives, sensibilities, of what might be going on in different people's heads? Does this macrocosm feel more precarious and less permanent than the other? Does it also feel more real?



II. BONDS & BOUNDS

The works in this section explore the dynamics of identification and differentiation that are so core to sibling dynamics in childhood and adulthood.

Suggested Readings:

Grey Held, <i>A La Petite France, On Our Road Trip West, The Bested and the Best</i>	98
Katharyn Howd Machan, <i>Virgin Poem, My Brother, Christmas Eve and I See</i>	112
Sarla S. Nichols, <i>Mother, Sister, Friend</i>	133
J.S. Kierland, <i>A Quick Kill</i>	143

1. In his poems, Grey Held explores the ramifications of birth order, especially chronic competition between siblings, which he sees in his relationship with his own brother and also between his sons. How much is the tension between siblings based solely on positioning, the power differential of age, rather than the temperaments of the individuals? Is this competition more intense and world defining for boys than girls? Is it modifiable? *Do you have a sibling, older or younger, with whom birth order created a constant power dynamic in childhood? Have you been able to modify it as adults?*

2. Katharyn Howd Machan deals with the painful subject of sibling incest in her poems. How did it affect her as a child and how does it continue to shape her life as an adult? What are the bonds involved here? The bounds? Do they lie where you expect them? How has this experience shaped her—and his—expectations of the larger world? *Have you ever experienced serious harm from a sibling that the rest of your family knows nothing about? Do you continue to see that sibling at family gatherings?*

3. Sarla S. Nichols describes in *Mother, Sister, Friend* a complex and painful family environment in which some of her half-siblings "never

had a chance," while she, the oldest, was able to escape and make a life for herself. Her younger sister feels abandoned by Nichols's choices and Nichols feels angry and betrayed by that response. Who established the expectations that each sister holds? How much have their very different views of social forces and individual responsibility shaped their expectations of each other? How much have these views been shaped by different experiences in their family of origin, experiences beyond their personal control? *Do you have a sibling that you feel failed to protect you within the family or against the outside world? Do you have siblings who felt they needed to leave the family behind in order to create a life for themselves? Are the tensions between social forces and individual responsibility active in any of the disagreements you may have with your siblings?*

4. In J.S. Kierland's *A Quick Kill*, he describes a decision to "divorce" his brother. Why do their different memories of the same childhood events feel so irreconcilable to both of them? Why, for Kierland, does divorce feel like the only solution here? Does it only have to do with their childhood? What does the metaphor of divorce tell us about how Kierland sees the sibling bond? *Have you felt it necessary to divorce a sibling because the values they took from your family of origin are so different from the ones you took from it that they feel irreconcilable?*

WRITING FOR INSIGHT: BONDS & BOUNDS

Choose a moment of conflict between you and a sibling where either one or both of you established boundaries that ultimately helped you come closer. Write a brief dialogue that reflects the negotiation process between you. Feel free to use humor, hyperbole, and other forms of dramatic license. Enjoy taking both sides. Listen to where either of you are reasoning from norms and where you are arguing from individual needs and about what kind of power and persuasiveness each way of thinking has in this conversation.



III. BROTHERS, SISTERS, KEEPERS

The works in this section explore what it feels like to have mentally or physically disabled siblings—the gifts and burdens of these relationships.

Suggested Readings:

Alison Stone, <i>Asperger's, My Brother's Collections</i>	167
Emily Rubin, <i>Crazy</i>	171
Jane St. Clair, <i>Talking Berkeley Down</i>	198
Andrea Rosenhaft, <i>I Love That You're My Brother</i>	210

1. How was Alison Stone's childhood shaped by the rage of her autistic brother? She describes him in the poem *My Brother's Collections* as a bomb ready to detonate. Without the ability to choose a sibling or to affect his actions in any way, how can a normal sibling find a safe space to develop? *Have you had a sibling with an illness, mental or physical, that you felt distorted your own development in significant ways?*

2. In Emily Rubin's story *Crazy*, eleven-year-old Harper describes her relationship with her troubled fourteen-year-old brother Nelson. How are Harper and her brother, even within the reality of his illness, able to establish and sustain a relationship? What role do the parents and grandparents play in preserving the relationship between the siblings? What do the words "brother" and "normal" mean to Harper? *Do you have a sibling with an illness or disability whose behavior was difficult or dangerous for you? What were your responses to him or her inside and outside the family? How responsible did you feel for him or her? What meaning did the word "normal" hold for you?*

3. In Jill St. Clair's funny, bittersweet story *Talking Berkeley Down*, the narrator, Frank, tries yet again to persuade his manic-depressive brother Berkeley not to kill himself. How does Frank's humor intensify our sense of Frank's exhaustion and also of his commitment to his brother? At different points, Frank claims to understand and *not* understand

his brother, but he is able to keep pace and faith with him, however disordered Berkeley's reasoning is. How does seeing Berkeley through Frank's eyes broaden our sympathy? *Do you have a sibling that you won't give up on even when other people may have become exhausted? What keeps you connected?*

4. Andrea Rosenhaft's memoir, *I Love That You're My Brother*, tells the story of a caretaking relationship between siblings from the point of view of the person who needs the care. How unusual is the level of awareness and gratitude in this story for people with mental illness? As Rosenhaft observes, there are no rules for brothers and sisters, no obligation to stay connected regardless of circumstances. What do you think her brother knows about her and sees in her that she may not? How does he preserve his own boundaries so he can support his sister and also live his own life fully? What is the relative importance in their relationship of steadfastness and of understanding—and what is their relation to each other? *Have you gone through a difficult period in your life where you really needed support for much longer than you expected and received it from a sibling? What were some of the emotions you felt during that time?*

WRITING FOR INSIGHT: BROTHERS, SISTERS, KEEPERS

Describe a circumstance where you actively cared for a sibling or a sibling cared for you. Write a short internal monologue from each side that shows how this action either confirmed or changed some basic assumptions in the relationship. Were these assumptions based on the nature of the individual or expectations associated with their being your sibling?

Describe a circumstance where help was asked for but not offered or offered but not accepted. Write a short internal monologue from each side that shows how this mismatch confirmed or challenged some basic assumptions in the relationship. Again, were these assumptions based on the nature of the individual or expectations associated with their being your sibling?



IV. DISCOVERY

The works in this section explore what happens when we discover something radically incongruent about a sibling whom we thought we knew well.

Suggested Readings:

Heather MacDonald Storey, <i>The Sister Who Wasn't There</i>	254
Charlotte Jones, <i>When Things Come to Light</i>	259
Paula MacKay, <i>My Sister's Shoes</i>	264

1. In Heather MacDonald Storey's *The Sister Who Wasn't There*, the sisters share only genes but not a childhood macrocosm because one had been given up for adoption. What kind of relationship does Storey imagine having with her missing sister and why does it matter to her to have one? What is the role of a proper name in establishing the relationship, both imaginatively and in real life? What qualities of the relationship they eventually establish partake of some of the qualities of early sibling relationships? What qualities of intentional adult friendship does it have? What does being genetically related have to do with the affection and closeness they feel for each other? *If you learned that one of your parents had a child you didn't know, how eager would you be to establish a relationship with him or her? Why or why not? How does this response reflect what it means to you to be a sister or brother?*

2. In her memoir *When Things Come to Light*, Charlotte Jones discovers an uncomfortable truth about her older sister after her sister's death. It leads her to wonder whether she ever really knew her sister. How does Jones respond to learning how different her sister's real life was from the one she imagined her sister was leading? How does she ultimately reconcile this troubling information with the admiration and affection she had for her sister and for the macrocosm she felt she and her sister had shared? *Have you ever discovered something about a sibling that made you feel you didn't know him or her at all? How did you resolve this? Are there things about your own life and choices you feel your siblings would not be able to reconcile with their image of you?*

3. Paula MacKay in her essay *My Sister's Shoes* realizes that, for all the powerful formative influence her twin sister has had on her "it had taken me half a century to understand—I don't know what it is like to be Pam." What does MacKay also learn in this essay about what it means to be herself? How has their twinship, internally experienced and externally reinforced, shaped their essential selves? How much were their roles, as trailblazer and admiring fellow traveler, chosen or assigned—and how has illness, how has maturation, altered these roles? How does MacKay, by writing this essay, begin to create a new macrocosm for herself? Although this essay focuses on the intense identification and complex differentiation involved with twins, do many of MacKay's insights apply whenever a younger sibling has highly identified with an older one? *Was there a point in your relationship with a sibling when he or she insisted on greater autonomy and differentiation than you desired? What did you do to shore up your own sense of individual identity when this happened?*

WRITING FOR INSIGHT: DISCOVERY

Think of a situation where you made a discovery about a trusted sibling that really rocked your world or they made a discovery about you that did the same for them. Write a brief character sketch of the sibling as you understood him or her before the discovery. Write a brief character sketch of the sibling as you understood him or her after the discovery.

If you are the one who surprised others, write how you feel they saw you before and after the discovery.

How does this discovery make it more complicated for you/them to generalize out from your relationship to the world at large? Did what surprised you seem out of character for your sibling as a person, or was it a surprise because it was not what you would expect of a brother or sister?



V. LOSS

The works in this section explore the impact of losing a sibling—at all ages.

Suggested Readings:

Greggory Moore, <i>How They Say It</i>	282
Christine Sikorski, <i>For the Brothers</i>	293
Kavanaugh, <i>Sing</i>	303
Alexandrina Sergio, <i>I Tell Her</i>	314

1. The narrator in Greggory Moore's *How They Say It* returns to his old neighborhood where he is flooded by memories of his little sister who died nearly thirty years before. His grief is as intense now as it was then. Are the expectations of himself as a brother he held then realistic? Even in hindsight, have they changed? How did his sister's death create a traumatic macrocosm for him? At one point he says, "I shouldn't have come back." What does he gain in coming back? What has he irrevocably lost? Have you had a sibling die as a child? *What were your responses to that death? What questions did it raise for you about what life held for you that the death of a sibling as an adult might not?*

2. In Christine Sikorski's poem *For the Brothers*, she conjoins the loss of her brother with the experiences of friends and of her own mother who have also lost their brothers. How does this enlarge and also ease the loss she feels? How does it help her refine what it means to be a sister in these circumstances? *If you have lost a sibling, has sharing that loss with a friend who has also lost a sibling been helpful to you? Do you feel these losses are distinctively different from losing a parent or losing a friend?*

2. In her memoir *Sing*, Kavanaugh writes of her attachment to her older sister Jean, which she describes at different points as a lifeline and primal. Jean, who was more outspoken, would "wrench my dreams out of me and then she'd champion every one." What is the significance,

given the nature of their relationship, of Jean's request that Kavanaugh sing at her bedside within the hearing of others? Whose dreams were being championed? *Have you had a sibling champion your dreams out in the world or championed theirs? What were the pleasures in either stance?*

3. In her poem *I Tell Her*, Alexandrina Sergio vividly describes to her sister, who has advancing dementia, the life they once shared. When her sister eagerly receives these accounts as stories, not memories, is that really a loss for either of them? *What would be a memory you would be reluctant to lose about your favorite sibling?*

WRITING FOR INSIGHT: LOSS

If you have lost a sibling, write a paragraph describing something you have seen, heard or experienced since s/he died that you think would appeal to her or him, that s/he would 'get' in a way no one else might. Write it in a style s/he would appreciate.

If you haven't lost a sibling, imagine a particular sibling and what you will miss most about them and their way of being in the world should they die. This can be a sibling with whom you are close or from whom you are currently alienated, this can be something that amuses or maddens you, but it is something that feels unique to him/her and to the quality of your relationship with each other. Be as detailed as you can, using all your senses to describe what you will miss.

WISING UP ANTHOLOGIES

ILLNESS & GRACE, TERROR & TRANSFORMATION

FAMILIES: The Frontline Of Pluralism

LOVE AFTER 70

DOUBLE LIVES, REINVENTION & THOSE WE LEAVE BEHIND

VIEW FROM THE BED: VIEW FROM THE BEDSIDE

SHIFTING BALANCE SHEETS:

Women's Stories of Naturalized Citizenship & Cultural Attachment

COMPLEX ALLEGIANCES:

Constellations of Immigration, Citizenship, & Belonging

DARING TO REPAIR: What Is It, Who Does It & Why?

CONNECTED: What Remains As We All Change

CREATIVITY & CONSTRAINT

SIBLINGS: Our First Macrocosm