

HILLTOWN *life*

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A lifetime of resonating with her animals brings therapist to new work: helping mourn their passing

Story and photos by Virginia Ray

CHARLEMONT—Molly Scott's welcoming smile makes even the outdoors brighter on a balmy Indian summer day, and her crystal blue eyes dazzle with warmth as she greets her visitor. Nearby her Paso Fino horse, Mahka, and another adoptee, 30-something-year-old Babba, nibble grass while vigilant (and also blue-eyed) Kishay, her Australian shepherd dog, bobs and dashes and runs and barks, showing everyone that she knows her job.

And when Scott, a singer, licensed psychotherapist, poet and pioneer in the field of sound and therapy with master's and doctorate degrees from Smith College and UMass, talks about her pets, her eyes deepen with the love and concern she has for these animals.

Recently Scott has decided to expand her counseling work to include bereavement counseling for human and animal companions.

"Really, it's because of my own deep and long and rich experience with animals and how deeply their loss has affected me," says Scott, glancing with love at her four-legged brood. "I really wanted to give affirmation to other people having the same experience."

Scott notes that people have often come to her in "a sort of offhand, apologetic way" to talk about how the loss of an animal—even a bird—has affected them.

"And they're so relieved that they can grieve," she says. "Who is to say that an animal you've lived with for 19 years or so and has always been there—that you wouldn't experience a huge, aching grief of absence when they're gone?"

This weekend Scott has been also intensely affected by a story about elephants in the *New York Times*, "An Elephant Crack-up?" by Charles Siebert, coupled with stories of the mass shooting in Pennsylvania of young Amish girls and the news that North Korea had exploded a nuclear bomb.

"I think of how the elephants honor and ceremonialize deaths in their communities and continue doing it over time, how elephants return to the site of loved

ones' burials again and again over many years with youngsters, caressing the bones with their trunks the way they do in life," she says. "I think about the cross-species communication that is coming to us from everywhere now. We are all endangered. And we know it."

"I think about [Lewis] Mumford's comment that there were cities of the dead before cities of the living, and how the elephants in the herd that killed a man in Uganda buried that man the way they buried their own and stood vigil over the grave—and that this cross-species grieving and honoring is only between elephants and humans. I think about how the Amish community stunned our patterned minds by attending the funeral and honoring the death of the man who'd killed their children. I think about what all this tells and teaches us. I think, I think, I think... and deeply feel, and struggle to make working stories that can inform my going on."

Scott also recalls a student in her class at Antioch College, where she teaches counseling, "who came in weepy," ultimately to explain that it was the second anniversary of her pet's death.

"I took that as a teaching moment to say, 'pay attention! This is a very big thing,'" says Scott. "I'm very interested in the deep consciousness of how people heal, of our interdependence; holding all things in equanimity. In the animal world, we are companioned as much as we are companion."

Scott's work in "creative resonance" has also showed her again and again how "sympathetic resonance" works, organizing things "cell to cell, animal to human, animal to animal."

"The world we live in with each other and our animals—because we are animals, too—is in the mid-brain," Scott explains. "We modulate our basic systems, they're regulated very early by our caretakers. And when that [warm, loving care] doesn't happen, little animals and little babies die. The animals will walk into that part of our hearts and brains."

Scott says that a recurring theme in her therapy practice is



Molly Scott and her Paso Fino horse, Mahka, in Charlemont.

"that people feel their grieving is discounted by others because they are suffering the loss of animal, not human companions."

"Yet we know the research is clear that relationships with animals can be as life enhancing as those with humans and that their loss can be equally devastating," she says. "Friends who would never discount the death of a human family member will remark to someone grieving the loss of an animal friend, 'but it's only a dog; you can get another one.' People are sometimes hesitant to bring these feelings up or come to counseling for fear they will not be taken seriously."

A lifelong connection—even after death

Scott, who has lived in the country most of her life (after time at school and working in New York City where she missed horses and would visit the carriage horses in Central Park) has a special bond with her horses.

"When I'm riding Mahka, I just get happy—deeply happy," she says with a smile and a shrug. "Sometimes in the woods, when we're both getting a little tired, I feel like a centaur; that we're one."

Because of the incredible bond between us and our beloved pets, Scott understands that the loss of a pet is more than "just a little doggie in a box," but calls into us every previous loss that we've experienced, too.

"That's why it's a good idea to talk with someone who can hold big stories," she says. "It's about what and who we love and how it connects us to one another and how we go through our losses."

One of Scott's own big stories was the loss of her horse, Tilly, who contracted colic at about age 30. Scott tells in detail of her walking Tilly around the pasture deep into the night. Walking—after a veterinarian "tubes" a horse with colic—is about the only thing to do to keep help clear things up. After hours of walking, Scott says, "It was like we were in another world together, like we were at the River Styx."

"It was the middle of the night and we were so isolated and I got so tired, and I had to lie down and I went to Tilly and told her that I

would be able to hear her," says Scott quietly. "I struggled not to, but I fell asleep and in my dream I thought I heard this sort of soft, whicker sound and then I heard another sound. I awoke, you know, bolt upright, with a start, and she was gone. I think she was trying to talk to me and tell me that she just couldn't go on."

Scott also learned more about the amazing connection we have with animals from "the cat who taught me how to love cats" when she was living down the road from her present home.

Before she moved to her home, she had seen a cat in the cellar at her previous place, quite a distance removed along the same road. "This cat just came and sat out there in the pasture," Scott says, eyes wide in remembering her astonishment at how "Spotty Apple," as she came to be known, steadfastly hung around. "She came and really courted me, even though I didn't like cats at the

time much and I hadn't paid any attention to her. And she stayed 20 years."

One day Spotty Apple then disappeared, and Scott believed she'd gone off to die. But three weeks later, Scott nearly stepped on this "little bundle of bone and fur" that lay on her doorstep.

"She'd come back," Scott says. "I bundled her in a shawl and, at the time I was composing a score for a musical, so I played the piano right over her and then one day, I had to go out and couldn't take her with me and that's when she took the opportunity to go."

"What that said to me was so huge," Scott says. "I realized how much of my life she held. I'd been married, divorced, had children come and go. So I want people to be able to tell me these stories, because not everyone can hold them."

Scott says that experiencing the stories of those from many walks of life in her clinical prac-

tice has taught her to be "really grounded," and that the stories of these lives have filtered into her and her home, where she's surrounded by nature and poetry and music.

"For me, at this time in my life, I want to be useful, to offer people a place to hold stories like this," she says, noting the interrelatedness of all. "It's all connected; our environment has gone crazy. We've forgotten to listen to how we live on the earth and the animals do tell us, they show us, how to be human, how to be grounded, how to be on the earth, how to be with each other in a mutually respectful, loving way."

Scott has offices in Shelburne Falls, Charlemont, and Amherst and can be reached at (413) 339-5501 or visit her Web sites at www.mollyscott.com and www.creativeresonance.com.

GONE

Late autumn,
and mist moves across the lawn
where fallen leaves, slippery and golden,
are shrinking back to brown

Down in the pasture
the mare moves, her golden hide,
cetacean, surfaces from sodden weeds,
her arching neck, her amber eye, gliding across the field
until the mist envelopes her

And you're gone too, sinking below
the sonar of my sight into your undersea
of shadows, leaving me beached
on strands of story, fading
feeling the ground pull out from under me
tugged towards absence

Now is the time for falling down,
the gold to brown dissolving
grief to ground
these ancient
ceremonials
of loss

—Molly Scott
October 11, 2005



Scott's other companions: Babba, left, and Kishay, right.