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Web Posted: 12/23/2009 12:00 CST

In times of loss, a sense of hope and renewal

[Scott Stroud](#) - Scott Stroud

When his wife died not long before Christmas two years ago, the holidays changed forever for the Rev. Harris D. Shinn.

“The idea of Christmas in my mind was love of family and the joys of children,” he explains, “and that flew out the window, of course.”

Shinn, 92, is a retired Baptist minister. He lives at the Meadows, a Morningside Ministries retirement community on Babcock Road, where he was one of several residents who filmed video greetings, to be sent by e-mail, for family and friends. The greetings, as charming and varied as the elderly residents who delivered them, can be found online at mmlearn.org.

Shinn wore a dark jacket and bright red Christmas tie for his greeting this year — the third he has done so far. He sat in front of a paneled faux bookcase, his hands interlocked behind a candle and tiny sleigh on the table before him.

It was harder to maintain composure during his 2007 presentation, which can still be found on the Web site. He described his wife's final months of life, talked about the blessing of having their children come home for his 90th birthday just before she died, and noted that he and all three of their children “were awakened at midnight, the hour of her passing.”

But dwelling on Shinn's losses would be to miss the point of his life now. He has an aura of stately elegance — and no room to let loneliness creep in.

“This is the problem that many people have here,” he says. “They dwell on what they've lost rather than what they have or what they can become.”

Shinn isn't like that. He e-mails prodigiously and reads widely on the Internet. (In his greeting, he spoke of “making application to be on Facebook.”) He also puts together PowerPoint presentations for fellow residents.

He's done them on lightning, the Northern Lights, caves — whatever strikes his fancy. A few weeks ago, he did one on gemstones.

“It was such a thrilling thing to me to get into the many kinds,” Shinn says. “Color is just one little part of what makes a gemstone valuable.”

It's not clear how many of Shinn's fellow residents attend his presentations or what they glean from them. He feels sure he gains the most.

“I just go to the Internet and look until I find something that interests me,” he says. “Then I start copying and saving and printing.”

He left me thinking about a neighbor who lost her husband less than a month ago. No one will blame her if she grieves through the holidays. There's no good time for death and loss, of course, but some seasons are harder than others.

I hope that she, like Shinn, will find ways to celebrate the blessings that remain.

This year, he plans to spend Christmas Eve with his daughter and granddaughter. He'll go to church, too, but without the ministerial obligations that once made the holidays chaotic.

Instead, there will be times of somber reflection. It won't be quite the same, but he's OK with that.


“In the quietness of my life now,” he says, “I've had some spiritual experiences that I never had before.”

It's a holiday, after all, that promises hope and renewal to us all.

jstroud@express-news.net

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