



**Streams of Seasons and Questions (Looking Glass Falls)** CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

## Highland

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of the scriptures, liturgy, prayers and creeds makes her “wonder if I should just quit.” Her struggle is apparent when she takes this inner tension a step further: “Truth be told, I don’t believe a lot of the same things you no longer believe. The only difference really is that confronted with questions about traditional Christianity, you took a path into freethinking and I went toward a form of progressive Christianity.”

What intrigues me here and begs more probing is what Susan means by choosing “a form of progressive Christianity.” She offers more hints as she continues her story.

She pursued a doctorate in interfaith theology and in the process she discovered that “accepting the beliefs of another as valid was the first step in pulling down the whole house of cards that was my ‘received’ belief system.” Susan served on the board of the Interfaith Center of the Presidio where she built relationships (key concept) with a diverse circle of theists and non-theists.

What seemed to soothe her “allergic” reaction to church was a call to “a progressive congregation willing to wander off the orthodox ranch.” With the encouragement of her community she began “to reconstruct my belief system.” But not so much a system as a living “organism.” In the evolution of her faith, she became convinced that Christians need “to undertake a serious look at the Jesus question in light of our conversations with people of other faiths and of no faith.”

I take that to be a sensible statement and stance. That “serious look at the Jesus question” was an important part of my own exodus from faith. The story of Jesus can be told in a variety of ways. I think it’s the season to hear those stories told afresh, even by free-thinkers.

Susan has a certain dread of Holy Week. “There aren’t many churches that satisfy my mystical or panentheistic way of understanding what that was all about.” She contemplates staying away, not attending services this year. She imagines she may “go to the ocean.” “I am totally on board with your love of the natural world.”

Speaking of oceans – and oceans of ideas – I’m curious what Susan’s “panentheism” looks like. As my handy dictionary defines it, panentheism is a theological word for the belief that “God is greater than the universe and includes and interpenetrates it.” Perhaps this is the “form of progressive Christianity” Susan espouses, yet leads to some confusion, as she admits, when she states “I do not believe in a supernatural God.” Can a person be a theist without a God? Is our language inadequate here?

Susan Strouse concluded her letter to me by affirming the importance of “books, conversations, encounters, relationships [to] help us understand the viewpoints and beliefs of others.” In her perspective, this causes us to “explore and clarify – and maybe even change – our own [beliefs].”