

Read and unread: To exegete the culture

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

Every now and then I read a book for the simple reason that everyone else is reading it. After all, a faithful preacher needs to exegete the culture and the congregation as well as the lectionary texts.

On this theory, a while ago I picked up Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now*. I had trouble with the initial pages and had to put the book down after two chapters. "Enlarge your vision," the author urges. "If you develop an image of victory, success, health, abundance, joy, peace and happiness, nothing on earth will be able to hold those things from you. . . . God wants to increase you financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, creativity." As I read, I kept thinking about the people I know who face challenges that do not and will not respond to an "enlarged vision."

Another inquiry into what people are reading and talking about led me to *The Secret*, by Rhonda Byrne, who tells readers that thoughts are like magnetic signals. "As you think of yourself living in abundance, you are powerfully and consciously determining your life through the law of attraction." I read that summary of the book on the same day Elizabeth Edwards announced that her cancer had returned. I had to put the book down.

The books I've savored lately are ones that friends have handed to me. One is the novel *Abide with Me*, by Elizabeth Strout. It is about a minister whose Maine congregation puzzles over his response to personal loss and grief. Tyler Caskey quotes Bonhoeffer and says his prayers in an empty church. "He loved the slightly musty smell, the simple lines of the tall windows, the rows of white painted pews, the air seeming to hold within its quietude all the prayers and hopes and fears of those who for the last century and a half had sat humbled on these benches before God. He felt immensely blessed to have this job."

Rory Stewart's *The Places in Between* is an amazing story, told with respect, wit and grace, about the author's walk across Afghanistan a few months after 9/11 and the

ouster of the Taliban rulers.

The Glass Castle: A Memoir, by Jeannette Walls, is the most fascinating book I've read in a long time. Walls tells a harrowing story of growing up in an utterly dysfunctional yet resilient family. Her nomadic parents are deeply flawed—the father is loving when sober but demonically destructive when drunk. The family never has enough money, food, clothing or shelter. Somehow the children survive and learn to take care of one another without self-pity or resentment.