

# Stocking the shelves

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

At the end of summer my mother would launch her annual canning process. She retrieved large Ball jars from the cellar, sterilized them in boiling water and sealed tomatoes, beans and rhubarb from Dad's garden into them. The food would appear on our dinner table throughout the winter.

I follow that tradition, modestly, by making strawberry and blueberry jam every year, but even more by storing away information and ideas gleaned from my summer beach reading. With no less care than mother gave to putting up food I plan ahead, carefully choosing my books. My hope always is to store away substantial, lively homiletical material that will help me through a winter of preaching.

This year I reread Gary Dorrien's two-part essay on postliberal theology, which we published in our July 4-11 and 18-25 issues. Instead of trying to make Christian faith reasonable, says Dorrien, the church should concentrate on making it visible. George Lindbeck put it like this: "Pagan converts to the early church did not absorb Christian teaching intellectually and then decide to become Christians. They were attracted to what they saw of the faith and practices of early Christian communities." Sounds like a faithful growth strategy to me.

Huston Smith's *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* was alternately stimulating, irritating and provocative. Frederick Buechner, in *The Eyes of the Heart*, shared eloquent and moving descriptions of experiences common to us all.

Roger Angell's *A Pitcher's Story: Innings with David Cone* reinforced my passion for baseball. The son-in-law of the late E. B. White, Angell is better than anyone else at describing the mysteries and particularities of the national pastime.

*Ghost Soldiers*, Hampton Sides's gripping account of the 1945 rescue by U.S. Army Rangers of 513 survivors of the Bataan Death March, was a moving reminder of human sacrifice, resiliency and hope. I loved Richard Lischer's *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church*. Like Lischer's, my theological education

was refined and completed by a small congregation of extraordinary Christians and unforgettable characters who initiated me into—and somehow survived—my early and confident attempts at ministry.

Finally, I appreciated *John Adams*, David McCullough's biography of the man who shaped, participated in and wrote about the formation of our system of republican democracy. It is also about his equally extraordinary wife, Abigail, who wrote him, "In the new code of laws . . . I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more favorable to them. . . . Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands." Much of this book will, as they say, preach.