

Taking awe breaks: The miracles that greet us each morning

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

I love living in a big city: the energy, the pace, the sirens. I love being able to walk or ride a bus to work, or catch a train to the airport. I love crowded sidewalks, tourists craning their necks to see skyscrapers, businesspeople with briefcases and iPods weaving their way through the maze of shoppers and lookers and dawdlers conferring over city maps.

But there's a downside: I miss the elemental contact with creation. For years, when summer has afforded the luxury of time off, I've headed for the ocean. A day there consists of reading, walking, biking, swimming, sand-castle construction (if there are little ones around), a trip to the seafood market, a dinner of shrimp and grilled swordfish, and a game or two before bed. This year's hit was Scattergories, which left family members of all ages howling in laughter. We spend the entire day out of doors in intimate touch with creation.

On the first morning, I sat down in a porch rocking chair and opened *What Do We Know*, a book of poetry by Mary Oliver. Another good way to begin a day at the ocean, or anywhere, is with a psalm or two. Psalm 136, for instance:

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever. . . .
who made the great lights, . . .
the sun to rule over the day, . . .
the moon and stars to rule over the night

A friend gave me a small volume of psalm paraphrases, *A Book of Psalms: Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew*. Here is how Stephen Mitchell renders Psalm 136: "Give thanks to the unfathomable . . . whose miracles greet us every morning."

As I read that sentence, a miracle was occurring over the ocean in front of my eyes. There are pelicans here, big, ungainly birds with broad bodies and huge beaks

designed for scooping fish from the surf. While they are not particularly graceful or attractive as they sit on the pier, in flight they are astonishing. They sometimes fly single file, and I once counted 27 overhead, swooping down in disciplined formation and skimming a foot or so over the ocean surface before climbing back up. On this morning, six were circling and watching for fish from a hundred feet up, tucking their wings back and then, like Air Force F-16s, hurtling themselves straight down into the ocean, surfacing to enjoy breakfast, then rising up again. I watched for maybe 20 minutes, mesmerized, amazed, grateful.

I love my city life. But I miss the miracles of creation. In the summer edition of *Weavings*, Gunilla Norris writes: “Many of us are juggling so many things that we are run by our lives rather than living them as gifts from God. What if we could learn to stop for a moment many times a day? What if in those moments we could decide to notice the sheer miracle of being alive? We would then be taking awe breaks instead of coffee breaks.”

Poetry helps. Here are lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s blank-verse epic *Aurora Leigh*:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round, and pluck blackberries.

Mary Oliver’s poems are full of wonder at the beauty of common stuff—a grasshopper, a hot summer day, a swan, flushed cheeks after a winter walk. Oliver’s partner of 40 years, photographer Molly Malone Cook, died recently and Oliver published *Our World*, a book of Cook’s pictures: an old woman watching children play, a couple eating breakfast, a boy looking through a telescope. Oliver, who carefully observes nature, says that Molly Cook taught her to pay equal attention to people.

Earth is crammed with heaven, the Creator is encountered in Creation, God is present in the wise and mysterious rhythms of the world and in the intricate wonder of a summer flower, the vastness of a starry night, a three-year-old’s energy and curiosity, the smile of a stranger.

Give thanks to the Lord, whose miracles greet us each morning.