

Confessions of a Midnight Cyclist

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At the end of July, on the eve of my 32nd birthday, I set out from my home at the foot of Burnaby Mountain for Grandview Park on Commercial Drive in Vancouver, riding my mountain bike in the dark. By midnight I arrived at a gathering of many other kindred souls—midnight cyclists all—to partake in my first Midnight Mass.

Midnight Mass, despite the Catholic connotation it brings to mind, has nothing to do with religion. Essentially it is a splinter event from the more well-known Critical Mass, the monthly daytime gathering of bicyclists in downtown Vancouver that has frustrated many SUV drivers and commuters on their way to business meetings or home from work. The difference is that the riders in Midnight Mass—held on every second Thursday since late 2005—are decidedly of the insomniac type.

I've long partaken of the joy that is night riding, but this event was the first time I had ridden with others at night. I quickly noticed that many of the Midnight Massers were of college and university student age, but there were a few older ones in the crowd. My somewhat youthful looks helped me blend in well with this group of people, who mostly seemed to be about a decade younger than me. This fact helped provide me with the motivation to not only keep up with the rest of them, but stay at the forefront of the group. On the eve of my birthday I had to prove, if only to myself, that I could go the distance, meet the challenge, and any number of other athletic-themed clichés.

When I arrived, the group was already getting a bit antsy and raring to go. Still, there was some debate about where to go. Finally it was decided—through the time-honoured democratic process of screaming, shouting, and clapping—that we would head for Spanish Banks. Somehow I knew it would be a long night.

In a burst of excitement the group hurried loudly down 1st Avenue toward Science World. Those of us who got there first had to wait for the rest of the group to catch up. The organizers of Midnight Mass were definitely prepared, as there was always one person with a walkie-talkie in each cluster of cyclists, so that coordination was never a problem. After a lengthy pause we left as a group for the next stop at Granville Island, where after a longer wait it became obvious that a large percentage of the entire group wouldn't be able to make it all the way to Spanish Banks. As I learned later, many did turn back and head for home at various points during the trip, although most made it more than halfway to our destination.

The night was not simply about reaching a place—it was about having fun. This fact was proven by our antics at Granville Island, where as a group we rode maniacally around and through the parking lots, culminating in one particularly exhilarating ride up and down a three-story parking garage. There's something of a forbidden thrill in riding a bicycle at night, especially through dark streets in the city. The possibility of danger is a reason for both riding at night and avoiding the same. That element of danger is only lessened, not eliminated, when several other bicyclists ride alongside you. At one point, much later

during the night, word came via walkie-talkie that one bicyclist had been struck by a car on West 4th. Fortunately there were no serious injuries, and the cyclist in question joined us during the final leg of the trip after exchanging information with the driver.

By the time we reached Spanish Banks there were only a hardy few of the original group left. As far as I was concerned, I had accomplished my goal for the night, and I allowed myself to relax with everyone else. Until this time I had acted as an observer and marginal participant in the group, but I decided it was now time to introduce myself. I chatted with a few people while on the beach, including the main organizer, Simon.

While we were all talking amongst ourselves, a young woman may or may not have shed her clothes right before me and may or may not have gone skinny-dipping with a couple of guys in the water.

It was well past three a.m. by the time I decided to make the long trek back home to Burnaby, and I finally got home at four. The ride back was much spookier than the ride in, and my muscles simply couldn't make all the hills that had been simple earlier in the evening, but I felt invigorated. It was a great way to spend a birthday.

Midnight Mass continues to meet every second Thursday at 11:45 p.m. in Grandview Park on Commercial Drive. While I've been unable to attend any further Midnight Masses (including the infamous "Midnight Undie" ride in August, where many participants rode in nothing but their underwear) due to work priorities, I hope to make it out to another very soon. If you're interested in participating, you can find more information and pictures at midnight-mass.blogspot.com.

Maybe I'll see you there.