



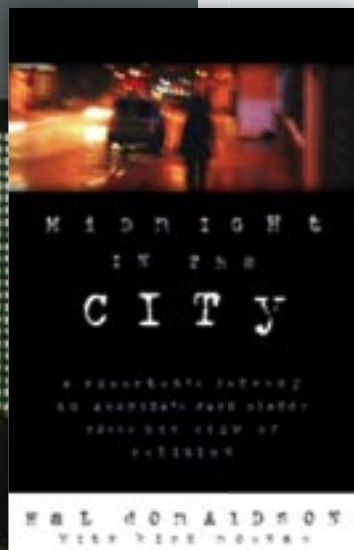
M I D N I
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A REPORTER'S JOURNEY TO
PLACES ROCKS HIS VIEW



AMERICA'S DARK
OF RELIGION

Editor's note: Hal Donaldson traveled to eight cities and rode with police on the midnight shift. In addition, he walked the streets at night interviewing drug addicts, gang members, prostitutes, runaways, the homeless and others. He compiled his encounters in a new book, *Midnight in the City* (Onward Books, Inc., 2005). Following is an excerpt chronicling



Donaldson's journey that took place before he became editor in chief of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel* and founded *Convoy of Hope*.

The police sergeant sat in his windowless office in the precinct's station and clipped the end of a fresh cigar. Piles of rap sheets, reports and photos of convicts and victims competed for space on his desk. Hanging crooked on the smoke-stained wall directly behind him were two "most wanted" posters. Two banged-up file cabinets and a leaning coat rack consumed two corners.

M I D N I G H T I N T H

He lit up, took a long drag on the cheap cigar, exhaled and then measured me from behind the smoke. His hollow eyes told me he was disappointed at my youth. Like most people, he probably thought I was younger than my 34 years. I shifted in my seat and waited for him to speak. Instead, he rolled the cigar between his thick fingers and took another drag. After what seemed like minutes of him sizing me up, he kicked his heels atop the desk and the mood changed.

“What’s your name?”

“Hal,” I said, intimidated.

He let my name hang in the air like foul-smelling cigar smoke. Maybe this

“Follow me,” he grumbled between clenched teeth that held the cigar in place.

I followed him into the hallway where he introduced me to a sturdy looking officer. We shook hands and made small talk. My companion for the evening was a veteran of the force, unimpressed that a reporter would be tagging along with him and, I guessed, unfazed by most anything we might see on the streets.

With a bulletproof vest hugging my chest, we began cruising his beat. It didn’t take long for the night of action to begin. Over the radio we received orders to investigate a miss-

key, the officer warned, “We’re gonna have to break the door down.”

I’d seen doors knocked down on television and it always looked easy. The officer kicked the door several times. Though he was powerfully built and wearing combat-style boots, the door didn’t budge.

“Dead-bolted!” he said.

“Do you want me to ask the neighbors if they’ve seen anything?” I interrupted.

Instead of answering, he gave the door one more kick. Nothing.

“Yeah, maybe someone knows something.”

He knocked on the door across the hall, which opened cautiously after a minute or two. Through the small crack I could see a sliver of poverty: bare, uncarpeted floor, furniture that looked like it had been pulled from the trash, broken tables and splintered bookcases sitting in the middle of the room. Two children wandered around listlessly. One kid, no more than a year and a half old, had urine dripping out of her soiled diaper and down her leg.

“Yeah?” said the frightened mother.

“Lookin’ for the guy in 313,” the officer said.

“Haven’t seen him — try over there,” she said.

We proceeded down the hall and banged on another door. The man who answered was nearly incoherent, one eye closed, the other unable to look straight. The apartment behind him was dark and filled with cigarette smoke, and smelled like human excrement. From an unseen television set I heard the disgusting sounds of a pornographic movie.

“What? Hey,” the guy said, rubbing his face.

“You seen the fella in 313?” the officer asked, holding his breath.

“Huh? No, I don’t know who lives

With each step down the concrete stairs, my shame grew. I could almost hear God’s disgust and feel His disappointment: Who do you think you are? Do you really think you’re too good to get your hands dirty? After all I’ve done for you — you won’t even extend a hand to help this man?

was a bad idea, I thought. Maybe I should have started in a smaller city.

Too late; I was here. More than that, I was determined to see where this adventure would take me. With that settled, I mustered the nerve to ask a question.

“And yours?”

“Sarge.”

My eyes searched his desk for a nameplate, but could find none.

“You ever done a cop ride-along before?” he asked, not waiting for an answer. “This is New York and you’re riding on the night shift.”

I swallowed hard. “That’s what I’m here for.”

The sergeant jumped to his feet. He was imposingly tall and built like a linebacker. His face was chiseled, but worn.

ing person complaint. Within minutes we pulled into “the projects” — a row of low-rent, high-rise apartments. By the fierce stares of its residents I knew my blond hair was the wrong calling card. Undeterred, I shadowed the officer up three flights of stairs to apartment 313. The stench emanating from the apartment led us to believe there might be a dead body inside. The officer’s knuckles pounded the door.

“Police!” he shouted.

No answer.

He pounded some more.

“Police! Open up.”

Still no answer.

“Let’s find the manager or someone who has a key,” he barked in frustration.

When the manager couldn’t locate a

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there,” he said, reaching for a lighter in his robe pocket and flicking the flame absent-mindedly.

We marched upstairs and knocked on three more doors before giving up on the neighbors.

“Let’s try the fire escape,” the officer said as though I were his partner. “We’ll go through the window.”

We climbed the rest of the stairs to the roof where the officer held me back with a wave of his hand. He opened the door quickly and stepped out with his hand on his gun. He made sure the place was clear, and then motioned me onto the roof.

“Roofs are a common place for drug deals to go down,” he said. “You don’t just come waltzing out on roofs.”

As we tiptoed over the gravel I noticed a few hypodermic needles and cigarette lighters. We scurried to the building’s edge and climbed down the fire escape. When we reached the third floor the officer smashed the window of the apartment with his flashlight and opened the pane. I stooped down behind him and stepped into an apartment shin-deep in trash: jugs, food boxes and wrappers, filthy clothes, dozens of pornographic magazines, sleazy videos, balled-up sheets, beer cans and whiskey bottles.

I didn’t know which way to turn, but the officer trudged to the other side of the room. There, under a thin sheet, was a man — alive or dead, I couldn’t tell. The officer pulled back

the sheet with his flashlight and the form moved. He was naked, unshaven, and in a drunken stupor.

The officer promptly radioed for another vehicle to transport the man to a detoxification facility.

“Hey,” the officer said to me, “help me pick him up.”

I began to obey, but my mind, body and soul hesitated. The smell in the apartment was nauseating: thick, unavoidable, like warm death and sewage, and it seemed to emanate from the man on the bed. I felt like I was going to vomit. So I didn’t budge.

“Hurry up,” he said, irritated.

Finally, feeling the scorn of the officer, I cautiously stepped through the piles of debris and grabbed one of the

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man's arms. He couldn't even lift himself. We put a reeking bathrobe and a pair of pants on him, and then draped his floppy arms around our necks so we could lug him downstairs.

With each step down the concrete stairs, my shame grew. I could almost hear God's disgust and feel His disappointment: Who do you think you are? Do you really think you're too good to get your hands dirty? After all I've done for you — you won't even extend a hand to help this man?

As the detox vehicle pulled away, I climbed into the squad car and waited for the officer to return. I stared absently at the dashboard, disappointed in myself and pondering how far I had drifted from the image of Christ. I silently asked, *Was this trip to New York and the other seven cities really just about writing a few magazine articles about life in the inner city or was I hoping somehow to reignite my faith that had grown into a Sunday morning ritual?*

The truth erupted in my mind: I was weary of my brand of religion, where I showcased my successes and buried my failures on Sundays. There wasn't space in my church life for confession or human frailty. Somehow, on Sundays, worshiping Christ and learning God's Word had been demoted to a secondary concern. Church had become primarily about networking with friends, and meeting the expectations of others. I had begun to take my church for granted — not soaking in all it had to offer or stretching myself to support its various ministries. To everyone but me, I was a model Christian. I obeyed the Ten Commandments and even performed acts of kindness every now and then, but there was something religious and prideful residing in my heart that prevented me from fully walking in the footsteps of

Christ. Somewhere along the way, I had stopped growing in my knowledge of Jesus. And emulating Him was no longer my highest priority.

Inwardly I was crying out for some place to be real, and, finally, sitting in a squad car in the projects of New York, I admitted to myself that the magazine assignments were just an excuse. I had embarked on some sort of spiritual quest to regain my soul and rediscover the heart of Jesus — and that is what had led me to the streets of New York.

Alone and convicted, I felt as naked before God as the man we had just

helped down the stairs. Yet somehow I sensed there were even tougher lessons ahead. Lessons that would reshape my faith and change the course of my life — that is, if I could survive the rest of the night. ■

From Midnight in the City (Springfield, Mo.: Onward Books, Inc., 2005) by Hal Donaldson with Kirk Noonan. Excerpted with permission.

Hal Donaldson is editor in chief of Today's Pentecostal Evangel.

E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.

ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

A. Admit you are a sinner.

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

Ask God's forgiveness.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13

B. Believe in Jesus (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

For further help, contact the Assemblies of God church near you.

If you would like someone to pray with you concerning your decision to follow Jesus Christ, please contact the church indicated on the back cover or call:

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