

## Notes on a Procession: FREE THE YOUTH

I know not whether laws be right,  
Or whether laws be wrong;  
All that we know who lie in gaol  
Is that the wall is strong;  
And that each day is like a year,  
A year whose days are long.

— Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, 1898

On the afternoon of July 2, 2023, a procession of 12 people, plus a few photographers, walked from downtown Seattle to the King County Juvenile Detention facility in the Central District.

Each person carried a cardboard letter—seven feet tall, brightly painted—spelling FREE THE YOUTH. There were no chants, no leaflets. Just the letters drifting up sidewalks and across intersections, and eventually left to lean on a fence outside the detention center.

The procession's route, which began at a gallery and community space on Third Avenue called Nii Modo, was roughly two miles. The walk took two hours and twenty minutes. The day was sunny with temperatures in the middle-high 70s.

These are notes from that walk.

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Before the procession, the letter-carriers talk logistics. "I have a suggestion," one tells the group. "If you don't have a lot of strength—and you know who you are!—you don't want the O or the U. Because, like, the E has a little handle you can hold onto."

"Right," says the one who'll carry F, leading the walk. "And think about playing with the letters. You don't have to always carry them one way. It all looks interesting. The letters are so big and commanding, the message will get across even if your R is upside-down."

There is some light, slightly nervous laughing about how passers-by might react. "This is America," the one who'll carry R says, in a growly, mock-tough-guy voice. "How dare you say something!"

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As the letter-carriers head out the door and into the city, a woman in lightly grimy clothes—who has the look of someone who spends a lot of time on downtown sidewalks, and perhaps sometimes sleeps there—slowly says the words as they head out the door: "Free. The. Youth."

Freetheyouth! Woo-hoo!” She looks at the first letter-carrier as he walks away with his F. “So that’s what he’s been working on in there. I wondered what he’d been working on!”

Others lingering on the sidewalk also say the words, but don’t offer comment. One man sitting in a wheelchair keeps repeating them in a flat tone, like somebody trying to commit something to memory: “Free the youth. Free the youth. Free the youth. Free the youth.”

The letters turn right, disappearing around the corner.

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Headed east up Pike Street, the letter-carriers pass two men in uniform, straddling bicycles: “Downtown Ambassadors,” employees of a city- and business-funded program to create an official—but non-police—presence on the street.

The two men decline to give their names, saying they’re on the job and probably shouldn’t be expressing opinions about street-art demonstrations, but seem to approve. One, who says he worked in public education for 13 years, draws a direct line between the winnowing of school budgets and youth incarceration.

“They’re cutting on schools, cutting school budgets,” he says. “They’re letting our youth flounder.”

According to a story in The Seattle Times—published six days after the FREE THE YOUTH procession—Seattle Public Schools has been wrestling with a \$131 million budget deficit. After making millions in cuts and layoffs, mostly from the central office, and liquidating its \$42.2 million rainy-day fund, the school board eventually passed a \$1.17 billion budget for the following school year.

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Two taxi drivers, waiting for fares in front of the Sheraton Grand Hotel in downtown Seattle, watch the letters pass by.

“What is this? Where they go?” asks one, named Getachew, who is originally from Ethiopia and has lived in Seattle for 17 years. I explain they’re heading to the youth detention facility.

“Oh, okay!” he says, his eyes widening. “All right!”

Does he agree?

“Yes! Oh yes!”

He laughs, smiles, gives a thumbs-up.

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On Sixth Avenue, at the southern edge of Freeway Park, a kid—middle school? early high school?—leans out the passenger-side window of a Toyota SUV, holding up his fist and shouting: “Free the youth!”

On a nearby bench, a man with the telltale fentanyl smoking gear—scorched squares of tinfoil, plastic straw, lighter—nods out, slumping as the procession passes. He jerks awake just as the H in YOUTH passes, and nods out again.

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Scott has long, grey hair, a mustache, and a tattered leather vest. He’s smoking in front of the Frederic Ozanam House—housing, according to its website, for “chronically homeless men aged 55+”, across the street from St. James Cathedral—and watching the procession.

“Free the youth—I’m not sure that’s the best idea,” he says in a quiet, musing tone. “Some of them kids are 500 pounds. I wouldn’t want to be on the same street as them. Beat the shit outta me. For nothin’.”

He pauses.

“But some of them kids, I don’t know, maybe they got blamed for shit they didn’t do. I got blamed for shit as a kid, shit I didn’t do.

Then, with a roguish smile: “But some shit I DID do!”

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A few minutes later, the person carrying the O in YOUTH tells another letter-carrier about a quick conversation he’d had with a passer-by. The way O tells it, it went like this.

Passer-by: What are the youth under oppression for?

O: Good question.

Passer-by [indignant]: You don’t even KNOW?!?

O and the other letters laugh.

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Two blocks south of Scott, Fannie is coming out of a corner store with a thin cigar in his mouth. Like Scott, he’s over 55, with a grey goatee, sunglasses, and a Kingdome cap.

“Free the youth?” he asks. “What’s that mean?”

I tell him they're heading to the youth detention facility—probably meaning, free them.

“FOR WHAT?!” he shouts. Then, quieter: “Them some bad emmer-effers!”

He looks at the sidewalk and shakes his head in a what-is-the-world-coming-to way, then looks up, shakes my hand, and wishes me a good day.

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Tenth Avenue, just maybe 15 minutes from the detention facility, is quiet and tree-lined, which offers the sweating letter-carriers some shade—but they have to negotiate low-hanging branches. It's also uphill.

The R in FREE gives a pep talk in an Evangelical-preacher tone: “Gonna be some bumps in the road, some hills. But still, you gotta carry on! Gotta carry the weight of what you're saying! It's not a short distance, and it's no small thing. To free all the youth. Gonna be a heavy lift!”

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Walking down East Spruce Street, just a block from the juvenile detention facility, a woman and a small child watch FREE THE YOUTH pass their front door. “What are they doing?” the woman asks. I explain. “Excellent,” she answers. “We'll come follow.”

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When they get to the detention center, FREE THE YOUTH set their cardboard letters on the sidewalk, leaning against a fence. The wind blows them down. The letter-carriers rush forward to prop them up. The wind blows them down again. Again, the letter-carriers prop them up. “Well,” F says, “we're not going to stand here and pick them up all day. We're done. Thank you. Thank you all.”

The wind calms. As the letter-carriers disperse, FREE THE YOUTH remains upright.

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