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Catalytic converters of the pandemic: Without the mask, the engine is dangerous

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One of the more recent and compelling sounds of the pandemic came into earshot the other morning as I sat on my front porch. My elderly neighbor was on her way to church. I could hear her car's engine roar to life, and as she maneuvered closer to me, the sound became more abrasive, squelched only louder and boomed ever lower into the distance.

This neighbor's car had been ransacked not long ago, and thieves had taken her catalytic converter. Thefts of this kind have been rampant lately, including throughout Oklahoma, and for good reason. The precious metals kept within a catalytic converter yield high market value, even higher under the duress of a global pandemic. It's quick cash for those strapped of it. It only takes a few minutes to remove the part and only a few seconds of listening to hear the effects of its thievery driving to an early morning Sunday service.

I'm thinking about this sound because I am a musician and music historian. Sound is my trade. I often wonder what our listening habits and sonic environments can tell us about ourselves. I think a lot about how a community's ears work. So naturally, when I sensed my neighbor's engine vibrating the neighborhood, I began to hear in its bellows and wounds a lesson on how this community hears and speaks its fears. From what I understand, the job of a catalytic converter is to channel toxic fumes created during combustion into less-toxic fumes. The engine can run fine without one, but the world is less well because of it. And clearly one added consequence of a missing catalytic converter is the engine's sound is no longer as suppressed as it was before. We hear what was inside the whole time. We breathe in the deadly vapors that were there all along. Remove the masking buffer, and suddenly the familiar machine becomes an unfamiliar menace to the world. It leaches poison. It disorders with its noise.

My metaphor may be forced, but I think the message is a sound one. Without the mask, the engine is dangerous. It makes a lot of noise but not a lot of sense. And so it goes with what seems to be another looming shutdown in this ongoing pandemic. Some in our communities hear masks as the problem and not the solution to our predicament. They seem to have grown deaf to the world, their cries of outrage fueled by the unfiltered toxicity of partisanship, their gripping attacks on safe and effective vaccines as swift and destructive as thieves with pipe cutters. Our ears work differently now that these voices have become unmuted and over-amplified. The catalytic converters are missing. Some listening lessons are in order, I suspect, and fast, before this sputtering engine grinds completely to a halt.

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