

Bearing Witness to the Destruction of America's Small Businesses

Author and activist [Jane Jacobs once wrote](#), "I was taught that the American's right to be a free individual, not at the mercy of the state, was hard-won and that its price was eternal vigilance, that I too would have to be vigilant."

Continuing, Jacobs added "I was made to feel that it would be a disgrace to me, as an individual, if I should not value or should give up rights that were dearly bought."

Many Americans are far from vigilant right now. State and local government officials are strengthening their petty tyrant muscles as they [promulgate absurd rules](#) and prevent people from enjoying the outdoors. Despite some protests, if polls are accurate, [most Americans support](#) continued lockdowns.

Maine's license plate displays the motto, "Vacationland." Their motto is more than an aspiration. Maine has [thousands of miles](#) of iconic New England coastlines, Acadia National Park, thousands of lakes, and the rugged mountainous end of the Appalachian Trail.

Tourism is one of the major industries in Maine, as [37 million out-of-state visitors](#) spent \$6.5 billion in Maine in 2019. That won't happen this year. In late April, Maine Governor Janet Mills announced [out-of-state visitors would be barred](#) from Maine unless they quarantined for 14 days after arriving in the state. This proclamation is slated to last at least through August 2020.

Small businesses serving vacationers earn their living in a few short summer months. The governor's proclamation

effectively [closes them](#) down for the year.

Jacobs wrote, “there is no virtue in conforming meekly to the dominant opinion of the moment.” What can Americans do so as to avoid meekly conforming? Vent on social media? Break the law and risk imprisonment? For most people, civil disobedience is not a practical option. Few of us have the constitution of Rosa Parks or Mahatma Gandhi.

Yet, we can still take powerful action. We can bear witness. “Bearing witness has three elements,” writes [Umair Haque](#):

“Seeing through their eyes, those who are being harmed, abused, failed. Seeing through history’s eyes – which means calling things what they are. And seeing through humanity’s, or futurity’s eyes – which means the duty of never being silent about either of the first two, because that is what the future, or all humankind, would ask of us.”

Railing against injustice is not witnessing. Bearing witness means being aware of the suffering of others, not just the suffering seen from our view of the world. The media provide poignant stories about people who have died of COVID-19. Their stories are tragic, and yet other tragic stories remain untold.

We need more witnesses to the many small businesses that are failing as the lockdown continues. Their stories need to be told with empathy rising from the deepest place of our commonly shared humanity.

Today, I bear witness to the suffering of the owners of [Edgewater Motel and Cottages](#), a family run business in Bar Harbor, Maine, the gateway to [Acadia National Park](#). Like most Edgewater guests, I return for the same week each year. Like 95 percent of their guests, we are not residents of Maine. Edgewater’s business model depends on loyal, out-of-state repeat customers.

David and Jayne Bowden own Edgewater. David is the seventh generation of his family to have lived on the Edgewater's property, covering a span of 225 years. His grandmother started the cottage business in 1939.

Jayne tells me that the governor's actions have been "paralyzing" and "devastating." Like most small businesses, they operate on small margins and don't have a large nest egg. With no income, their savings are rapidly disappearing.

"Every generation has poured their heart and soul into this property," Jayne said. "To think we could be in a position that jeopardizes the history of this place is beyond belief."

Many of the businesses that make up Maine's tourism industry are family-run like Edgewater. [Direct tourism spending accounts for](#) "roughly 11 percent of the state's gross domestic product" and "supports a host of other industries across the state."

I imagine Governor Mills thinks she will make up Maine's budget shortfall with a funny money handout from Washington. A federal government handout may fill the state's coffers, but it won't save businesses like the Edgewater.

It's likely you've heard a "government-as-courageous-and-decisive hero story" today. Economic educator Don Boudreaux recently challenged us to [tell competing stories](#). Competing stories can expose the consequences that stories of heroic governments skip – "consequences such as how the diminished material prosperity caused by the shutdown actually decreased our health and safety over the long run."

If we bear witness to the suffering of America's small businesses and share stories about them, perhaps the worst can be avoided. These businesses are counting on us. Without pressure, government will not yield, and once-thriving businesses will be cruelly destroyed. Small business owners who serve us find themselves in peril. We can tell their

stories.

Boudreaux writes that “infantile [government as hero] stories are easy to follow, they’ll win large audiences.” He continues, “We must challenge, with better stories, the cartoonish tales that are now spreading virally and that threaten to become a calamitous intellectual pandemic.”

The Edgewater is not uniquely deserving; there are many, many Edgewaters. Yet, theirs is a story I can tell. Now, you must tell the story of the small businesses you support. Their future and America’s future depends on our decision to bear witness.

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