

Did you watch the Oscars?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

I'll be the first to admit that Caledon and Hollywood are a long way apart but TV and social media have a strange way of uniting the world and making us all feel just a little bit closer to one another. So what may seem distantly unrelated can actually have an impact much closer to home than we might think. No I'm not talking about Kirsten Wiig's strange red dress with side flaps that many on social media likened to lasagne noodles, nor am I discussing Mahershala's fantastic rendering on the classic tux. (That man has style!) No, I'm referring instead to the acceptance speech that did just about everything except graciously accept an Oscar.

Joaquin Phoenix won the Best Actor Award for his role in *The Joker*, a movie I admit I have not seen. Because I have not seen it, I won't comment on the movie or his acting abilities. Mr. Phoenix did not appear to show the same restraint however when it came to lambasting dairy farmers. Has he been to a farm? Has he watched, first-hand, a calf 'stolen' from its mother? I'm not sure. What I do know is that he had a platform last Sunday night and used that platform to make a series of statements that have garnered worldwide attention. He used his Oscar acceptance speech as 'the opportunity to use our voice for the voiceless.' Here's the thing about a platform however. It requires one to be responsible in its use, to be conscious and conscientious about the words chosen. Sadly, too many are not (Donald Trump and Doug Ford immediately come to mind.) The thing about using a platform is that very often, when you are not conscientious about your words, they contribute to the misinformation already rampant on mediums like social media. More importantly, very often, one doesn't have that same platform available to retract or correct their words, so the misinformation continues to spread at a pace not unlike a wildfire.

In case you missed it, here in part is what Joaquin had to say: 'I think that we've become very disconnected from the natural world, and many of us, what we're guilty of is an egocentric world view - the belief that we're the centre of the universe. We go into the natural world, and we plunder it for its resources. We feel entitled to artificially inseminate a cow, and when she gives birth, we steal her baby, even though her cries of anguish are unmistakable. Then we take her milk that's intended for her calf, and we put it in our coffee and our cereal.'

This is too simplistic a statement. It makes a great headline but I ask; is this statement the truth of a dairy farmer's life? Is it their reality? I won't pretend to be an expert on the life cycle of a cow but I do know a few farmers (Caledon after all is a pretty green Town, surrounded by farmland) and this is, simply put, too simplistic a statement. It's a soundbite, an opportunity to get people talking and sure, that can be a good thing - here we are talking about it even now, four days after the Oscars. I just wish the talk wasn't so divisive and that it was about more than just the soundbite. Wouldn't it be nice if dairy farmers had the same platform as the rich and famous? The same opportunity to stand up in a room full not just of their peers but entire nations of people glued to their TV sets to watch the strutting and posturing of the pretty and popular. In a perfect world they could respond to the likes of Mr. Phoenix and share with the world what a day in the life of a dairy farmer actually looks like.

As well, I'd like to ask (as I have asked similarly, at least once before) from where Mr. Phoenix thinks his vegan and plant-based diet comes? Perhaps not from actual dairy farmers but someone is 'exploiting' the 'natural world' he references for the purposes of growing the food he and (presumably) millions of other vegans consume. As some research suggests, 'it is nearly always a question of scale' when it comes to determining which type of 'exploitation' is more harmful to our natural environment than another. All consumption, for whatever form of nutritional intake we choose to partake of, requires some form of production - no doubt some of which interferes with the natural order of things. Can we, as Mr. Phoenix also asked, 'create, develop and implement systems of change that are beneficial to all sentient beings and to the environment'? I'm sure we can. Can we lay all of the responsibility for 'cruelty' and exploitation in the world at the feet of dairy farmers? I'm sure we must not! After all, farmers of all varieties were sustainable and green, long before the likes of Hollywood movie stars decided it would be cool to be sustainable and green.