


Diversity matters, Stephen King, but it doesn't just happen out of good intentions

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By Leonard Pitts Jr., By Leonard Pitts Jr.

Dear Stephen King:

I hope you'll indulge me as I try to explain something I suspect you still don't quite understand. Namely: why so many of us were so disappointed with your take on the lack of diversity in this year's Oscar nominations. As the white-dominated and male-centric list of contenders was announced and women and people of color expressed their frustration, you took to Twitter.

"As a writer," you wrote, "I am allowed to nominate in just 3 categories: Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Original Screenplay. For me, the diversity issue — as it applies to individual actors and directors, anyway — did not come up. That said, I would never consider diversity in matters of art. Only quality. It seems to me that to do otherwise would be wrong."

The backlash was fast and furious. Authors Roxane Gay and Sarah Weinman took you to task. But it was director Ava DuVernay who best captured the chagrin many of us felt: "When you wake up, meditate, stretch, reach for your phone to check on the world and see a tweet from someone you admire that is so backward and ignorant you want to go back to bed."

You were soon trying to tweet your way out of the hole you had dug, noting the responsibility of artists and creative people to "make sure everyone has the same fair shot." Women and people of color, you wrote, are "badly under-represented, and not only in the arts. You can't win awards if you're shut out of the game."

These are noble sentiments. They also miss the point.

One of the things that makes you my literary North Star is your uncanny ability to get so much mileage out of each word. Well, you packed a lot into the words of that initial tweet, too, including an implicit assumption that seeking quality and seeking diversity are mutually exclusive. You seem to feel we should simply trust your good intentions in seeking the former and the latter will somehow take care of itself.

The idea that diversity will work itself out without being nudged is a common conceit, but a mistaken one. You don't create diversity by being a good person or being pure of purpose. You create diversity by creating diversity, by valuing and seeking it. Which requires you to acknowledge your biases and become intentional in rooting them out.

As an example: In 2007, a study by Cornell University professor Joseph Price and University of Pennsylvania professor Justin Wolfers found racial bias in NBA refereeing: White refs were more likely to call fouls against black players; black refs had a mirror bias against white players, though the tendency was not as strong.

But here's the good part. When Price and Wolfers revisited the issue seven years later, they made a fascinating discovery: The disparity in foul calls had all but disappeared. Apparently being made aware of their biases inspired the refs — absent any instruction from the NBA — to take corrective action.

We all have biases. It's how human beings are wired. But for some of us, by dint of color or gender — or a combination thereof — those biases have power to determine who gets arrested, who gets educated and, yes, who gets an Oscar nomination.

So the question is: What should we, as good people, do about it?

As a male writer, I now make it a point to seek women if, say, I'm looking for experts to interview or I'm listing civil-rights heroes. Maybe that seems awkward and stilted to you, and maybe it is. But here's what I've learned: As a human being, I am a creature of implicit biases. So I can't trust my own good intentions.

Please don't ask me to trust yours.