Merry Christmas, Season’s Greetings and the Best New Year ever for 2015

Dear friends,

I first began writing these Christmas messages in 2007 after my return to my home in the Catskill region in central New York. I had been living in New York City since 2005. It took another three years before I again wrote to express a few personal thoughts commenting on the year that had passed and wishing everyone a wonderful holiday season. That has been the tradition ever since, and though I tell myself every year that it will be the last, once again here I am at my computer writing down my thoughts to tell you a little about what life is all about for me this wintry season.
Before I begin, may I tell you about my little cat Looney who is very sick with tumors of the ear. His survival is seriously threatened, and I fear he may not even survive the holiday season. He first came to live with me in December of 2004 and was an estimated five years of age, all black except for a few white hairs. He was a big cat weighing about 16 pounds. If everyone had a disposition like his the problems of the world would vanish overnight. He is so gentle with such an innate sense of goodness. There is much we humans can learn from animals, and I am grateful to have had him live with me. For those who believe in such things, do send some good thoughts and/or prayers Looney’s way.

I had two major goals for the year. The first was to completely read the Old Testament through. I have already read the New Testament, though that will require further reading and study. The Old Testament, however, is a different story. I have made slow progress mostly, I think, because of the difficulty in identifying with stories that are so far removed from any real sense of time. I react to the Old Testament as though it were a concoction of hand-me-down folklore and make-believe. Nevertheless, I withhold judgment pending further study, and am aware of some of the gems of wisdom sprinkled here and there, the 23rd Psalm being one of the greatest, and “To everything there is a season….” Clearly, great significance also lies in that the books of the Old Testament are an essential part of a belief system for both Christians and Jews. So I hope definitely to finish reading it next year.
My second goal was to finish writing three or four books which had been in progress for some time. There I far exceeded my hopes and have now completed nine new books. For anyone interested, they are posted on my new website at www.booksandmusicbydavidirving.com. Some of these books are short and some were near completion so the accomplishment is not quite as impressive as it first sounds. It is, nevertheless, a relief to finish these books, and I hope now to spend some time in catching up with my reading, doing some targeted study, and leaving writing aside for the moment, though some projects still remain to be completed.

I attended several different churches during the year and found myself at odds with some of their beliefs. I was especially troubled with Christian attitudes toward animals which in some cases even included the idea that it is okay to hunt. I expressed these concerns in two small books, Is It Christian to Hunt and Where Flew the Sparrow: How the Acceptance of Cruelty to Animals Crept Into the Christian Faith. The latter is really an amplification of a chapter from my book The Cruel Science: Animal Research from Aristotle to the 21st Century. I felt the subject was so important that it needed to be set out in an independent book. For those unfamiliar with the “Sparrow” scripture, it comes from Jesus’ words “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father [God].” Matthew 10:29. The passage reveals God’s care and concern for all living creatures. It also implies a future destiny for the animal kingdom, though not too many Christians are eager to contemplate thoughts like these. Yes, speciesism (prejudice against animals) reigns supreme in the Christian church. (The same holds for the Jewish Synagogue, though I generalize here with little personal experience.)

As for Christian speciesism, my book Where Flew the Sparrow addresses that issue. In regard to Is It Christian to Hunt, I might mention that Stephen R. Kaufman, M.D., co-chair of the Christian Vegetarian Association, in reviewing the book wrote that: “We should be grateful to writers like Irving... for providing the arguments we need to show that oppression and abuse of nonhuman animals fundamentally violates Christian ethics.”
Once again, my main topics of concern for the year have been religion and animal rights. I realize it might be difficult for some people who have known me from way back to understand why I have become so involved in these issues in recent years. I thought, therefore, you might find it interesting if I used this Christmas message to explain why I regard them to be of such vital concern for not only me but everyone. There are three main points I would like to make.

First up is the issue of the health of the planet and the prospects for survival of humankind and the other species of animals who live on the earth. We all know something about global warming and that unless we humans resolve the crisis by significantly reducing carbon dioxide emissions, the planet is in for some very drastic changes of the not very nice variety. In fact, they have already begun. (See www.350.org) Some scientists have even predicted our species is on a fast track for extinction with some going so far as to assert that the situation is even now irreversible. The cause? Loss of bio-diversity, climate change, and overpopulation. What seldom gets pointed out, unfortunately, is that the consumption of animals is a large part of the equation, so much so that the waste from billions of animals consumed for food is responsible for 18% of the greenhouse gases contributing to global warming. For anyone who might think that 18% is minor, consider that these gases come in the form of methane. According to NASA research, methane gas is 105 times more powerful than carbon dioxide in heat trapping potency. This means that over a 20 year time frame one pound of methane gas will trap as much heat as 105 pounds of carbon dioxide. With an estimated 10-11 billion animals being slaughtered for food in the United Sates every year alone, and countless billions more being kept in waiting to be slaughtered, the role the slaughter of animals and animal consumption plays in global warming and the threat to human survival could hardly be more apparent. It is a serious threat and the threat continues to grow. According to a United Nations report, already 38% of the ice-free land surface is taken up by livestock. With the world population expected to increase from 7 to 9 billion people over the next 30 years, how much more land will then be required to house these hordes of animals used for food, and how much more methane gas will they produce?
It’s time to get honest and acknowledge that the human consumption of animal foods is a significant factor contributing to global warming. And, unlike corporate powers that practically require a world war before they’ll acknowledge any responsibility for reducing carbon emissions, the ability to significantly reduce greenhouse gases lies in each of our individual hands. All we have to do is stop consuming animals. The solution could hardly be clearer. It has been estimated that only 5% of the land currently devoted to food production would be required to feed the world’s population without the production of animal foods. It takes 1/6th of an acre to feed a person on a plant food diet compared to 3.25 acres to feed someone on a meat-based diet. Want to fight global warming? Yes, by all means, go fight the corporate powers. They richly deserve it, and we the people just had a major victory in New York in defeating the fracking industry. But we can all do our own personal part too. The more we stop consuming animal products the more we are reducing greenhouse gases and saving planet earth. We can, each of us, make a significant difference.

The second point to be made concerns our individual health. It has been firmly established that the consumption of animal foods is a significant factor as a cause of the killer diseases including cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, multiple sclerosis, and many others. I go into this subject in depth in my book *The Protein Myth: Significantly Reducing the Risk of Cancer, Heart Disease, Stroke, and Diabetes While Saving the Animals and Building a Better World*. When we consume animal foods we are playing Russian roulette with our personal health and to family members and loved ones if we are responsible for feeding these poisons to them.

The third and final point to be made is about the cruelty associated with slaughtering animals and our general attitudes toward animals. Cruelty toward animals impacts our character, the ways in which we interact with the world, and who we are as individuals. This is a sensitive subject so let me say that wherever I criticize in this area, I was formerly as much a part of it as anyone else. However, as I pointed out to a pastor friend, where once I was blind now I can see.

For Christians, consuming animals violates the scriptures in the Old Testament and the New Testament, no matter what scripture may be used to rationalize animal consumption, for the following reason. No place in the Bible does it suggest that slaughtering animals cruelly in order to eat their flesh is acceptable. Jesus said that God is the God of Jacob (and Abraham and Isaac). This is what Jacob said about cruelty to animals in describing the actions of his sons Simeon and Levi. “May I never come into their council; may I not be joined to their company—for in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel.” *Genesis 49:5-7* Both the Old Testament and the New Testament show respect for animals and that cruelty to animals is wrong. The point is—and I am stating a
logical fact, not being accusatory—that whoever participates in eating animals that have been cruelly slaughtered quite clearly becomes a participant in the cruelty. There is no way of getting around it. And certainly being cruel is not Christian. The churches condone cruelty when they serve animal products for church functions. That includes ice cream, by the way, but not to worry. Delicious non-dairy ice-cream is now available. (Try Tofutti.) In serving animal foods, flesh and dairy, the churches are promoting cruelty. The Biblical thing to do would be to not eat animal products (which also produce sickness and disease) because all animal produce in today’s world is produced through cruelty (factory farms, etc., including so-called humane slaughter).

It would make a tremendous difference in the lives of Christians if they rejected this cruelty just as Jacob rejected the cruelty of his sons in hamstringing the oxen. In today’s world, they commonly slaughter cows by ripping their hides from their bodies while they are still living. That is where steaks and hamburgers come from. And the cruelty on factory farms in the production of meat, poultry, and fish is well documented. What would Jacob say about eating the flesh of these animals? What would Jesus say? What does God say about this tremendous mistreatment of his nonhuman animals by human beings just so that they can consume animal flesh? Perhaps the answer to that question lies in the destiny to which the continued exploitation and abuse of animals inescapably leads.

As for those who are not followers of some belief system that condemns cruelty, they also are stuck with the stigma of cruelty to animals when they consume animals that have been treated cruelly. Assuming they follow some kind of moral code that condemns cruelty, they violate their own code of ethics when they participate in this cruelty just like Christians violate the Biblical precepts when they consume animal foods cruelly produced.

This concludes the three points I wanted to make. But I might just add the following as to why greater understanding and compassion toward animals is so important for humankind.

In my book *Untying the Knot of Animal Dependency: The legacy of prehistoric humans to the modern world*, I go back to the beginnings of human existence to trace how human beings interacted with each other over millions of years. With the advent of language some 100,000 years or so ago came rapid technological advances in weaponry leading to greater hunting and trapping skills which led to mass killings of animals. This eventually led to human beings killing each other in warfare. By the dawn of civilization humans were dependent on animals to sustain the way of life they had invented. The continued exploitation of animals became the foundation for the system of sacrifice, first of animals, then of human beings, that governed pagan cultures, always with
increasing violence as a featured characteristic of human consciousness. These cultures included the Israelites of the Old Testament, though they did not indulge in human sacrifice, unless you count their slaughter of countless innocent men, women, and children—that is if you believe such stories to begin with. I myself am extremely skeptical. Fortunately, the arrival of Christianity fundamentally marked the end of the reliance on sacrifice as a way of life, at least on the surface. I make the case that it really went underground to reemerge in various guises, most notably in the sacrifice of animals in animal research laboratories, societal class systems, and increased warfare among nations. To these may be added factory farms, fur farms, circuses, rodeos, blood sports and other means of exploiting, torturing and abusing animals. They all have cruelty at their core and sacrifice animals for some perceived wished-for human attainment.

I believe and hope a complete new chapter in the evolution of humankind is just around the corner if we are able to arrive there before we destroy ourselves. The exploitation of animals must end and we must begin to live in the world of nature as partners and friends with the other species of animals who occupy the earth with us. If we do not do that, I believe we will go the way the other eighteen species of humans which preceded us have gone—silently fading into the night, unless, of course, we decide to end it with a bang.

I hope this Christmas you will give yourselves the gift of beginning to look at other species in a new light. Do you really need to feast on that turkey or ham or duck which arrives in your supermarket through a process of torture and abuse? Think what it would mean to reject the mindless participation in a cruelty-based tradition that goes on all across the land this Christmas. But even if you are unable to do that, or you can’t quite make the commitment, or you think it’s a good idea but all these “buts” get in the way, and then there are the neighbors, the relatives, and the what nots, and after all, what will people think? You will still do yourselves a great favor and have yourselves a Merrier Little Christmas than you ever could have imagined if you just acknowledge the truth of how barbaric and cruel our species has become because of our attitudes toward other species and refuse to go along with it any longer. It is not difficult to see that the brutality and murderous ways of human beings is directly connected to the exploitation and horrific abuse of other species.

I urge you to save the planet, to protect your health, and to refuse to be a participant in the cruelty in which consuming animals imprisons us. When we reject the world’s attitudes toward animals, we will become overnight more fulfilled and wonderful people. It is time to stop
being big bullies and to turn to love, compassion, and understanding for everything that lives. Therein will we find our true selves and our oneness with the universe and God.

Thank you for taking the time to listen. I send my love and well wishes to you all and wish you the very best New Year ever.

Blessings,

David
Paintings listed in numeric order

**Hendrik Meyer** (1744-1793)—Winter in a Dutch Village 1787

**Biagio d'Antonio** (1444-1516)—Story of Joseph, Son of Jacob, 1485

**Thomas Moran** (1837-1926) – Winter in the Rockies, 1867

**Alfred Edmund Brehm** (1829-1884)—European wildcat caught in a jaw trap, date unknown

**Albert Bierstadt** (1830-1902) — Rocky Mountain Goats, 1885

**Archibald Thorburn** (1860–1935) — Winter Landscape with Mallard, date unknown

**Charles Leickert** (1816-1907)—A Winter Scene, date unknown