2004: TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH ON MANY LEVELS:

Here’s my list of momentous events for 2004, ranging in topic from hard science to paternal pride, and in scale from outer space to home and hearth. For each category, I offer a widely reported news story, followed by an underreported story that was equally important to me.

Solar system. Two rovers have been roaming Mars like a pair of 7-year-old boys. They've been cruising around, looking for anything that might prove the former existence of water, poking, prodding, photographing and analyzing rock samples. Indeed, NASA's robot geologists did find convincing evidence for ancient water last year. Though planetary scientists have long suspected water, based on what look like river channels, the discovery of salt and rust proves that the conditions for ancient life were in place.

Meanwhile, the underreported story of the year was a successful winter solstice: The sun continued to shine and the Earth to spin. Nothing was as important as that.

Earth. In late December, a Sumatran tsunami destroyed communities along the Indian Ocean and beyond. The grief, recovery and political adjustments continue.

The underreported story for the same event was the power of earth science education, illustrated by a 10-year-old British girl named Tilly who was on vacation in Thailand. She recognized the warning signs of an impending tsunami from her recent school studies and alerted her mother. Consequently, the beach area at their hotel in Phuket was quickly evacuated. Thanks to level-headed Tilly and a teacher's effective lesson, about 100 people were saved.

United States. The back-to-back-to-back hurricanes that hit Florida and the Gulf Coast just before the November election were huge news.

The underreported story was of the climate havoc in the far north. Fairbanks, Alaska, queen city of the state's interior, was shrouded by hazardous smoke and haze from wildfires during much of last summer. Its northern forests and the soils that support them are drying out in the warming subarctic, where July temperatures in the 80s were common. Permafrost soils are melting like Fudgsicles below the sedge and moss. Woe to the polar bears. Woe to us all.

New England. Nothing compares to the Red Sox victory in the World Series. Even I became a baseball fan during the eighth inning of the fourth game of the Red Sox vs. Yankees league championship series. I went into my son's room to wish my sports-besotted 16-year-old good night. Then, with a bonding experience in mind, I decided to watch a few minutes of the game with him. By the time the electrifying five-hour game was over, I had become hooked for life.

The underreported story was Boston's engineering failure at the 20-year effort to bury a highway, dubbed the Big Dig, where water leaks, cost overruns and delays were pathetically normal. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the Eurostar express train whisks passengers beneath the English Channel in one of three dry tunnels.

Connecticut. Cesar Pelli was selected to design the state's new science center. I can't wait!

The underreported story was the resignation of Bill Hosley after seven years at the helm of the Antiquarian & Landmarks Society, a statewide, nonprofit historic preservation group that rose to prominence on his watch. Bill may not be a numbers man, and he may have trouble matching his socks and tie, but one thing was clear to me whenever I worked with him. He's smart like an
engineer, creative like an artist, enthusiastic like a preschooler and he writes better than most columnists. Moreover, he could teach archive-dwelling historians a thing or two about making history really fun. Good luck, Bill.

Storrs. The local story of the year was the dual NCAA basketball championships by the UConn Huskies women's and men's teams.

The underreported local story was the personal basketball achievement of my adult son Adam, who, in spite of having both cerebral palsy and autism, has become a swishing success. Although he made his first basket a few years ago (after persevering without success for about 15 years), it was only this year that he learned somehow to swish it, time after time after time -- thanks to the many unsung friends, teachers, caregivers and brothers who've believed in him all these years.