LIVING ON THE EBB AND FLOW OF DISASTER: OP-ED

Last year gave me my first chance to live between the tidal cycle and the disaster cycle. Though I've had personal encounters with both throughout my life, I had not lived through the rhythms involved, and therefore did not truly understand. Now I do.

Last fall, my wife and I leased an offseason cottage in Madison. We located there so I could hide and walk beaches while finishing a sabbatical book project, and so we could have convenient train access to family in Manhattan. Our two-story home was built in the early 20th century on the artificially filled edge of a salt marsh, between what remains a beautiful tidal creek and what had been a natural beach facing Long Island Sound.

Out the back door, I've been watching the tidal cycle. And since September, I've also been observing it from the second floor through a standard casement window adjacent to my desk. At first the marsh was just another pretty place responding to the seasons, as with the lakes, bogs and freshwater marshes of my previous experience. The foliage of the fringing deciduous woods and the colors of the marsh did what I thought they would: shift through their palette of earth tones.

But by October, I had begun to feel something new in my life -- a twice-daily pulse as steady as any heartbeat, which migrated ahead of the solar schedule. Superimposed on this steady six-foot rise and fall were extreme events caused by coincidences with storm setup and astronomical alignments.

At times the marsh was a lake, and at other times a trickle over mud. Half the time, the creek flowed happily in one direction, before happily reversing itself. As the weeks rolled on, I could feel a new pulse embedding itself into my psyche, giving me two days where there had been only one before. For the first time in my life, I found myself becoming a bird-watcher. Binoculars now sit on the windowsill.

Out the front door, I've been watching the disaster cycle, during which people build in harm's way, disaster strikes, shock ensues, they rebuild and then disaster strikes again.

Across the street is a phalanx of taller, newer, stronger, grander houses fronted by high, poured-concrete sea-walls. All were hard-hit by Hurricane Irene in August 2011. In fact, more than half were still undergoing repairs last September and October. The noises of hammering, sawing and construction vehicles were relentless at first, before slowing down. Our particular house lot had been flooded, rather than battered, so the main repair there was to replace the landscape plantings killed by the salty soak. To the west, the low dunes of Sea View Beach had been eroded. Repair there involved landscaping with stabilizing vegetation.

Three days before Hurricane Sandy, the frenzy of construction noises roared back to the houses on the street as owners and armies of day laborers battened down the hatches. At our house, the landscaper re-excavated the plants he had put in only one week earlier and moved them to higher ground. The owners of Sea View Beach could only pray.

The storm struck. The neighborhood was evacuated. The repair of the repair began anew. Our house was heavily damaged, so I missed a month of re-construction. But I did get back in time to see something truly astonishing. The Sea View Beach Association had hired contractors to put the beach back where it was before the last storm.

They did this by excavating sand from the marsh, dumping it about 40 feet toward the sea. How can this be legal? Owning a beach and owning a set of geographic coordinates are not the same thing.
Tragically, they misunderstand that their beach-dune-lagoon system must migrate or die. The only alternative is concrete.

For the first time, I truly understand our coastal cycles. One is back-door beauty based on a regular rhythm. The other is front-door wishful thinking based on chaotic recurrences. The twain shall never meet.