

Eulogy for Amy Gold, a Climate Visionary

Piermont, New York, November 15, 2117

A fictional story by Bill Menke¹

Our heads are cooled today as we welcome the Honorable Guillermo Menendez, Governor of the State of New York

Thank you. Members of the family, friends and coworkers, residents of Piermont and neighboring and far off places, my deepest condolences. Everyone here will remember September first, twenty-one seventeen, as the day when Amy Gold, one of the truly great human beings of our era, passed from our lives at the still-youthful age of eighty-five. Amy Gold's life drew together in harmony so many elements that might otherwise be diametrically opposed: environmentalist conservationist and successful builder, out-of-the-box visionary and traditionalist, preserver of community and welcomer of strangers, intensely idiosyncratic thinker and beloved mayor of Piermont.

Amy Gold was my lifelong friend.

There were four of us, all Class of 2050 at Tappan Zee High School. Amy Gold, Dana Standish, Lee Chang and me. One of our classmates nicknamed us the Four Flames - a name that stuck. That was back when references to anything having to do with heat were starting to take on negative connotations. We were outspoken. We were opinionated. We were hot-headed. We thought we knew how to save the world. And we were very hard for everyone else to bear. The nickname was very much intended pejoratively. And it fitted us like the sun gaiters we all wear every day.

Climate historians point to the years of our birth, 2032 and 2033, as the start of the Great Drought. It was the calamity that heated all the events of our generation. A fervent wish of Amy's was that Sparkill Creek would run again. And so it has for the last forty years. But for the thirty-eight years bracketing our graduation, Sparkill Creek was bone dry.

The Great Drought, together with the ever-worsening problem of coastal flooding caused by the rising sea, brought great hardship to the people of New York. I mourn the lost opportunities of my generation and am saddened by the despair that so many of my contemporaries felt, and to some extent, still feel. But it also encouraged acts of creative defiance that we Four Flames, and especially Amy our leader, epitomized. Me, focused on the politics of water; Lee on climate science, Dana on new modes of thinking in a world turned against us, and Amy about reimagining community in an age of relocation. We all succeeded to considerable measure - although so much more remains for you all to do.

I am so glad that Dana is here and will speak to us today; there is so much we have yet to learn from the author of Poetic Adaptation. And although Lee died tragically in Antarctica back in 2072, his memory lives on, and his contributions to the prediction of ice sheet retreat continue to guide global climate policy. The Four Flames are together today.

Amy's genius was thinking up crazy schemes and then convincing people to adopt them because they were not quite as crazy as they first appeared. Her first success, though arguably not her greatest, set a pattern. Rockland's housing crisis had grown to intolerable levels by the end of the decade after we graduated high school. Our population was growing as more and more Long Islanders moved in as the ocean ate their communities. The Hudson River desalinators whose construction I, then in the County government, had the privilege of overseeing, were just coming on line. Fresh water was in adequate supply, even though our reservoirs along the Hackensack River were empty. Amy was the first to see that we could make do without reservoirs. The high-rise housing complexes that she built atop former Lakes Tappan and Deforest were preposterous. Twenty years later they were the center of community life. And now that we once again get a little rain, the Hackensack River flows by two new city parks. Amy had hoped for - and prepared for - that possibility.

Amy always knew that life was full of trade-offs. She was cold-headed enough to run with the right compromise, once she found it.

The Sparkill Barrier, right outside these doors, was Amy's last big project. It, too, was both design genius and political compromise, undertaken amid much social angst and distrust. It saved much of Piermont from the rising sea. I am especially glad the old library - and the Flywheel - wound up on the dry side of the wall, for those were places special to me in my youth. But we all shed tears remembering that the Pier and adjacent lands are gone. Amy would always allow time for tears. But she would never end with them. You are Piermont, she assures us. You are what matters. Take care of one another. And find another Pier. Amy was special. Amy is irreplaceable. Join me in shedding tears for Amy Gold. Yet when your tears for Amy dry up, some of you must step up into her place.

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