

Channel 49
JOHNNY PROVOLONE

A tale about the meaning of success: (JOHNNY meets LEW on the boardwalk, "See kid, I know the secrets of success... --the ability to be able to take others for granted coupled to the ability to believe in yourself even if you have NO IDEA what you're doing..." { While one of the 'secrets' for success is stated explicitly, the other is not. }

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THE STORY OF *JOHNNY PROVOLONE*

(-which is not his real name-)

When she was a little girl she would pull off some small pieces of blanket fluff, roll them slowly in her palms and then with hands pressed together, sweetly, as in prayer, she would close her eyes and fall asleep. Her becoming a devout Catholic was therefore a congenital condition.

Years later when blanket fluff became acrylic she consented to marrying Johnny Provolone provided he maintain his meager position as assistant supervisor on the night shift at Crudgels Poultry Plant. She even consented giving up her teaching position, fifteen years tenured at a healthy salary, to bear their joint offspring if so blessed.

But somebody got drunk along the conveyer belt at Crudgels and barfed on the gizzards. That was no great shakes, oftentimes foul things were included with gizzard materials; this however provoked a factory-wide fight and the feathers really flew. Johnny's boss, a Crudgel son-in-law of low intellect had left the scene earlier in order to masturbate in the filthy john, leaving Johnny to deal with the disruption. He ended up getting punched in the jaw and slam-dunked with a twelve pound turkey. He quit, proclaiming the poultry processing business was not for him and then under the influence of a dream in which he played poker with three dead Popes and caught them cheating (five virgins in the deck,) he called off their church wedding. After much crying and the happy comfort of her relieved family she sent Johnny a telegram cross-town and thus ended their nuptial agreements.

Behind on his rent and wanting to leave town, Johnny conducted a 36 hour packing effort which started along the presumption that he could transport his entire past in 27 cartons and shopping bags. Uncertain of his future and under the guidance of a severe headache he ended up placing all contents stuffed willy-nilly into their containers along the downstairs curb for trash-pick-up and stumbled upstairs to imbibe some prescribed pain-killer remedy on an empty stomach and emptier mind.

Eyes closed, he was assaulted by hallucinatory images of the local squirrels carting a severed human head up to his bedroom window where it sang 'Yankey Doodle Dandy' in perfect key.

Headache finally gone after 12 hours of sleep he still felt or heard a buzzing sensation in his mind and decided he was either crazy or blessed with bizarre psychic powers or both. Immediately he fled toward the casinos of Atlantic City.

He hadn't much money to work with and lost most of it within fifteen minutes of his arrival. Soon he was evicted while trying to place a 25 cent bet at a 5 dollar-minimum blackjack table.

Hungry and confused he begged his escorts for money enough to purchase a cheeseburger, but being such a low-order roller he was deposited into the bitter boardwalk winds with-out nutritional comfort. It was here that he felt overcome with remorse and howled at the fates to be befriended by Lew, a 55 year old gent with a stocky frame and all of his hair combed neatly with greasy-kid-stuff into the same wave above sunken gray eyes that ignored the breezes for forty years.

They shared a bottle of brandy in the back seat of Lew's Cadillac and it was then and there that his host disclosed to Johnny his prognosis for immanent demise due to advanced prostate cancer.

"If I'm no good for the ladies, why live? They wanted to cut my balls off, and they're big ones too. I've always been proud of 'em. I said, 'Fuck you, Cut your own balls off. Stuff that radiation up your ass. Take those female hormones and make-you-puke chemotherapy and do it to yourselves!" He recounted, angry at the medical people who insensitively made those suggestions. "Me, I'll just croak."

"Play craps till the end. It's hard to take a shit. I'm in constant pain, I get these awful fears. I can't lose my money fast enough. I keep breaking even or worse -winning. I'm disgusted. I'm gonna do myself in with cocaine and cold pills. It's all I got."

"Don't you have anybody to leave your estate to?" Johnny asked.

"I got a nephew. He's a stupid fag and I wouldn't give him herpes! But maybe I'll give you some dough; what would you do with it?"

Johnny didn't know. "I guess I'd buy a cheeseburger..." He offered weakly.

"I like your honesty, kid. --Something I never had till just recently. I'm gonna give you ten grand. Maybe a hundred, maybe more. I'll see how my luck goes, I'd still rather lose it and walk away happy. --That's my happiness kid, my message to the lousy human race. Take your stupid, fucking money back because (Ha, ha) where I'm goin' I don't NEED it."

"--What's your name, kid?" Lew asked.

"Johnny Provolone."

"Provolone -- that's a cheese, isn't it? Fits you perfectly."

Johnny beamed with pride.

"You don't look like no Italian; I got Italian relatives. Good people but I hate 'em. Not all Italians, just these because they're family. No, you look like a skinny Albanian. Me? I'm half-Pollak and half-Jew. I got a big Pollak body and a Jew-mind. That's why I'm so successful, they can't see me coming. They expect what's on the outside to be on the inside." Lew laughed, then became serious, "I really shouldn't kill myself because I'm a

Catholic but what the fuck, I haven't been to Church for thirty years so what difference can it make?"

Johnny told him about his betrothal and romantic betrayal by events beyond his control.

"Whaddaya want to get married for? It's bullshit. I married this tart once, A sexy, little thing. A dancer. Ow, could she fuck. Cost a bundle to get rid of her. Keep away from marriage kid. A stiff drink, a blow-job from a hooker and a nap is all a man needs to stay mentally fit in this world. Take it from me, I been successful. I KNOW the secrets of success."

Of this Johnny wanted to hear so he asked for the sharing of these wonderful secrets, the buzz in his brain increasing expectantly in volume.

"Always dress nice, suit and shined, black leather shoes. Cufflinks, gold watch, nice ring. Always smile. Look into people's eyes when you shake their hands, but don't let them see into yours. Got to know when to blink. Don't sleep too much (Johnny's heart sank -- this was his favorite activity) Laugh at everybody else's jokes --learn to tell a couple of your own, Keep ten on hand, Seven dirty jokes, two of them racially motivated, and three you can tell anybody. Got to be prepared."

"Is that it?" Johnny asked.

"No --Oh no. That's just to get started. Then you got to learn how to recognize talent -- new ideas. Find the idea-people who have little ambition. Buy those ideas cheap and run with them. Fifteen hour days, seven days a week, Christmas, New Years --Secure financing and sell, sell, sell! That's what it's about. ***You must have an innate ability to believe in yourself even if you don't know what you're doing.*** Then divide and conquer. Size up your enemies. All the small ones you buy out and fuck-over the larger ones who can damage you. This is the way. Very few of us have the fortitude to go through with it," Lew winked and Johnny felt his spirits dwindle with the knowledge that he was not one of the few.

"Of course there is another way to get going." Lew grinned. "--Get LUCKY first!" He laughed heartily and continued snickering with a contagious giggle, "Start out with money -- then it's all down-hill, When you start with money you can let other people work hard to make you more -- that's another key. --So tell me, Johnny, in what way would you like to be successful?"

Johnny thought. "I'd like to be a movie star." He announced.

"Forget it. You're too ugly, Not really UGLY but very unglamorous looking. Be a producer. Don't worry about PUSSY. See, women will want you as long as you have dough. You don't have to be a movie star to fight them off. Just be loaded. And, smart, or they'll wind up with the money and you'll wind up with nothing. Life is a battle for money."

And all this, time Johnny had thought that life was a battle to get up in the morning. He was really learning. In two hours he had learned more than he had in his entire six years

in high school.

Johnny was excited about his prospects. He even lied to himself trying to believe that he was a lot like Lew in motivation. His voice even changed. "So, Lew, what's on our agenda, here. What's next?" He prompted with a macho-leer.

"That's the spirit, kid. Look, I'm going back to the tables. But, I got to go alone, see. 'Cause you know me --It'll disturb my concentration. I can't operate if somebody around knows the real me. Got me?"

Fearful of being disassociated from his mentor, Johnny stumbled for propositions. "Well, ugh, what do I...do you want me to do?"

"Just hang loose, kid. I won't forget you." Lew slapped Johnny's knee and opened the car's door for them both to exit. "Can't stay in the car -- it's gonna be garaged. Not right to stay in a garaged car."

Johnny waited hours for Lew. Hours, shivering on the cold boardwalk, stamping his feet. Beginning to believe it was all a conned illusion.

At last Johnny saw Lew walking toward him, at first with some else; a well dressed call-girl holding his arm. They parted with a wave but Lew stopped, motioned her back and pressed an additional few hundred dollars into her happy hands. When next to Johnny Lew exhaled in relief.

"Had some trouble in the sack, tonight, kid. Almost cried to get my dick hard. 'Got to relax. Yeah, I made it, probably for the last time -- But you never know."

Johnny trembled with cold and fatigue. But he had to know if the promise still existed.

"So did you lose it all?" Johnny asked.

"Nah, that's the funny thing. I won. I won big. How many times have I come here and shtopped a couple hundred grand into their till. Shit. Tonight I couldn't give it away. It came back to me five times."

"What now?"

"I gotta see a priest, check into a top hospital with the best doctors. I got to do it, kid."

"And the money?"

"Hey, that's the deal. Without the money, I'm a fucking bum no one would lift a finger for. I gotta give it to them who promise to save me; whether they can or can't. It's their prize."

"All of it?"

"Of course. It's my only hope. --Oh, uh, you probably need a buck or two for a bus, huh? Here, I'll give you a five spot. Get some coffee, okay."

Lew thrust the five dollars into Johnny's cold hand and headed for the garage. "Good luck, kid, and don't forget what I tol' ya," he called back as he walked.

At first Johnny fought back tears of bitterness, But then he began to perceive part of the secret mystery of success. All was not yet revealed, but it seemed to revolve around the following paradigms --While Johnny was unsure Lew would, return; Lew expected (knew) that Johnny would wait for him. --Around this equation revolved the answer.

Johnny opened his hand anticipating that the wind would sail the five dollar bill across town or out to sea. The wind stopped and the money dropped to his feet.

There were different kinds of success in the world. Within the year Lew would be dead. Johnny picked up the five and decided to return home, call his ex-fiancé and try to get another job. That's what most of us would do. Go after the better odds.

From the Collection: "It's A Bizarre Life" 1987

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