

Ben Palpant

Article Title: *The Pinocchio Syndrome*

---

## *The Pinocchio Syndrome*

Pinocchio, the witless.

Pinocchio, the mischievous.

Pinocchio, the sometimes brave.

No sooner had Geppetto finished carving Pinocchio's legs and taught him to walk than the marionette bounced off the table and scampered out the door. With spindle legs and great flopping arms, Pinocchio gamboled off in search of adventure and fresh air. Accused of hating children because little Pinocchio ran off, Geppetto was imprisoned. When poor Pinocchio wandered back home, he found himself poorer than he thought: no Geppetto. He scavenged for food and found, instead, a talking cricket. The candid cricket said that a disobedient boy will become nothing more than an ass.

The wisdom of Solomon.

Petulant Pinocchio wanted nothing to do with such a kill-joy. He promptly hurled a hammer at the cricket and mashed it into a discolored pile of juice.

“What?!” you cry.

I know, Disney forgot that part.

So Pinocchio wandered into the street, begging for food. Poor Pinocchio. The neighbor, still reeling from a bad day, was cranky and dumped a bucket of water on Pinocchio. Welcome to the world, pal.

Pinocchio tried to warm himself on the stove, but fell asleep. When he awoke, his feet were burnt off: a symbol in more ways than one and a warning for the lad who would disobey his father. Geppetto

was finally freed after clearing up the confusion. He built new feet for Pinocchio who promised to be good. In a thrall of good intention, Pinocchio promised to attend school and Geppetto sold his only coat to provide school books for Pinocchio.

How easily resolutions disintegrate.

Pinocchio, the simple.

Pinocchio, the distracted.

Pinocchio fell into bad company...over and over...and over again. Manipulated, coerced, beguiled, bamboozled, he followed the strained music of pleasure and entertainment only to end up hungry, lost, and bewildered. Sure enough, he woke up one morning as an ass, comical ears, snout, and all. What is worse, someone wanted to skin him and turn his skin into a drum! What a shame! What can an ass do, but bray and whine and bray some more?

Pinocchio's pilgrimage was a meandering exercise in catastrophe, but for every bad companion, there was better companion to guide him. Unfortunately for Pinocchio, these wise companions took the form of little more than crickets and squirrels and so he paid little heed to their advice. So his early years are characterized by a simple-mindedness, a tendency toward distraction, and the ultimate transformation into an ass. We will call it The Pinocchio Syndrome.

Many of us suffer from The Pinocchio Syndrome. Like Pinocchio, we have leaned the ear toward catchy tunes, falling for self-pleasure and the flattery of Cat, or Fox, or Candlewick. Like Pinocchio, we have woken from a spiritual stupor and been entirely startled by the asinine face staring back in the mirror.

God has set us on pilgrimage and our pilgrimage need not end with such tragic transformation as Pinocchio. God has given us fellow pilgrims along this journey. Some companions are better than others and we cannot afford to dismiss those whom God has given to us as good guides. The difference between good companions and bad companions is that the former inspire Joy and the latter draw us down toward pleasure. The healthy imagination, the sanctified imagination, pursues companions who point it upward and inspire it toward Joy.

We were made to gravitate toward companionship of some kind, whether good or bad companions. We simply can't help ourselves. In a world characterized by fracture and isolation, where neighbors hardly see each other and family members spend more and more time in their own rooms, we still gravitate toward community. Our community, our companionship has taken a virtual form these days, but it still has the skeleton of community. We exchange real people in real time for virtual people in virtual time, but the desire for company is wired into our nature by a God who likewise loves company. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity defended so faithfully by Athanasius, remains the only convincing reason why we gravitate toward others and why community is worth protecting. If we are the epiphany of a Trinitarian God, sprung forth from his imagination, then we should fully expect a communal aspect to our nature and a primordial need for that community.

Indeed, God has not only wired us for relationship, but he has made us in such a way that relationships have a formative affect upon our lives. I have had friends who were on both sides of the moral fence and several who straddled it. But like Pinocchio, when I was with the debauched, I became debauched by proximity. Like Pinocchio, when I was with the upright, I became upright by proximity proving that “he who walks with the wise becomes wise, but he who walks with the foolish shall be destroyed” (Proverbs 13:20). Like Pinocchio, we are shaped by the desires of those around us and by the appeal of their conceived stories.

We were made for story and we were made for community, and people to people relationships are the points at which these two essential traits conjoin. Here at the crux of our lives we find our desires moved, our longings redirected, and our vision colored by what our friends think. Why do I like that band? Why do I laugh at those jokes? Why do I sense euphoria or despair depending on whether that team wins or loses? The answer is simple, I usually like what my companions like. Quite honestly, many of my desires are not a matter of conscious, rational debate, but a matter of what people around me like or dislike; hence, the immeasurable power of converging stories.

God wired us to be moved by converging stories and that is one of many reasons why Christ spoke

primarily in stories and why the Gospel is a story. It is story within story, transforming our stories. We are, like Pinocchio, shaped by the stories we encounter and would do well to choose wisely, but the choice is not difficult when the Gospel story has the seat of honor in our imagination. When Christ is our closest companion, when all we see has his fingerprint upon it, then shall we “sell the mighty space of our large honors for so much trash as may be grasped thus?” (*Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare)

I don't think so.