





Happiness and Joy During Turbulent Times: Mark Landini Of Landini Associates On How To Live With Joie De Vivre, Even When It Feels Like The Whole World Is Pulling You Down



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It sometimes feels like it is so hard to avoid feeling down or depressed these days. Between the sad news coming from world headlines, the impact of the ongoing raging pandemic, and the constant negative messages popping up on social and traditional media, it sometimes feels like the entire world is pulling you down. What do you do to feel happiness and joy during these troubled and turbulent times? In this interview series called “Finding Happiness and Joy During Turbulent Times” we are talking to experts, authors, and mental health professionals who share lessons from their research or experience about “How To Find Happiness and Joy During Troubled & Turbulent Times”.

As a part of this series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Mark Landini.

Mark Landini is creative director of Landini Associates, a multidisciplinary design and brand consultancy working globally from its Sydney base. Since 1993, Landini Associates has created and evolved retail brands, including McDonalds, T2, ALDI, Glassons, Sass & Bide, Jurlique and Coles. The firm’s new ALDI Corner Store, designed by Landini Associates, debuted in September 2021.

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Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive into the main focus of our interview, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood backstory?

If pressed I’d say that ADHD, asthma, and incredulity were probably the three major gifts that led me to become the designer I am today.

Undiagnosed ADHD forced me to simplify everything and became a central tool for how I think and design. Asthma, because it led to recovery in Rome and the Riviera, surrounded by a culture far bolder than I was born into. Incredulity was the unintentional gift of the self-congratulatory children I met at the monastery where I was educated. They say the isolation of boarding school is a perfect preparation for prison. It's true, so Covid is a doddle.

By some clerical error I was fast-tracked ahead of my peers, so left school early. Turning 17 and exhausted, I needed a rest. "No more exams ever please," so university was out. My teachers said I should go to Oxford but to study what? And my recently widowed mother, although proud, wasn't and couldn't buy this impracticality so without consultation arranged an art school interview. After the monks it was a revelation. I discovered a better society; funnier, more curious, intelligent yet self-depreciating people; a refreshing contrast to the self-entitled Englishmen I'd coexisted with at boarding school.

Growing up in Rome informed the rest, subsumed me in history, stories and proportions, and forced me to learn another language, another view from another cultural perspective.

What or who inspired you to pursue your career? We'd love to hear the story.

My early experiences roused my curiosity about what it means to live well. I never really pursued a career, more a pleasant way of earning money, not too labor intensive, doable with the maximum rewards both emotional and functional. I think you're lucky to find a job where you can use the sun of your experiences. (Note for the editor / not for print: This is not a spelling error. Sun is intentional over sum!) I wasn't looking, just resting, and it found me instead. That's kind of how I think about joy.

None of us can achieve success without some help along the way. Was there a particular person who you feel gave you the most help or encouragement to be who you are today? Can you share a story about that?

My encouragement has always come from the women of our family. My mother, my Italian Aunt, and my wife, Rikki. But it was a place, Australia, and its clever, adventurous, cheerfully direct yet self-depreciating people, who gave us their faith.

With some irony it wasn't a designer who encouraged me the most, but an Australian client, who, with the planets aligned just took a punt.

Craig Watkins ran the country's most successful liquor chain but replied to our letter criticizing its authority in wine. Together he, his marketing man, Philip Hartman, Rikki, and I created a new wine retailing business from scratch. We called it Vintage Cellars and with a singular vision, created every component part of that brand: the strategy, identity, interiors, packaging, communications, and workwear. Twenty-eight years later, it continues to be a stunning success.

They took a punt on an unknown couple, working from their young family's rented flat. No company, no infrastructure, no local track record and no support, other than theirs. This generous gift of faith could have backfired. They could have ripped us off and walked away with our designs. They didn't. Rather, they supported our ideas with a conviction we now take for granted from our clients all over the world. They were our story's protagonists, and it was a miracle of joy to have been part of it!

Can you share the funniest or most interesting mistake that occurred to you in the course of your career? What lesson or take away did you learn from that?

I just wrote "sun of your experiences" instead of sum. It's better. More joyous.

While at art school I tried to start a boxing club. I received no applications so quickly learned that not everyone is the same, and it's probably better to consider context and expectations before making assumptions.

Slowly I relaxed and discovered an ability to conceive, embrace the playful, the unexpected and the brave. More helpfully, I discovered that if I believed in it, I seemed capable of selling these ideas too. I made a lot of mistakes (as you should at college) but was taught that execution and detail are as important, too. Lessons I required a refresher in quite quickly.

What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now? How do you think that might help people?

Covid has been good for reassessing “values.” So, right now we’re thinking a lot about the future and better ways of doing things, like how we work, for whom and for what reason. I’m increasingly interested in the play part of work but am concerned how the “virtual” is misplacing the “real,” and how satisfaction with the “superficial” is replacing the benefit of the “tested core of humanity.”

I have a real concern about society’s addiction to dopamine and so as a designer I’m thinking carefully about how our forced use of technology replaces human interaction in society. Right now, I’m thinking about our studio workplace, and what that place should be when we return after Covid. Even if it should be a place like it was before; if we should take the time to reinvent for the better, rather than just return.

So, we’ve conceived a “Home office” concept, inspired by the nomenclature of what has become, but bettered, I hope. We are going to buy a house, not a studio, a shared home, not an office. We will meet there when we need to and stay if we choose to. Everyone can use it, but not just for work, to think, talk and even entertain their friends, stay if they drink too much. It will represent our design thinking but more importantly our thinking thinking.

Covid has flipped everything. We now work from home, that’s where the processing is done, when once it was a place of rest and regeneration. So, our new place of work will probably be just a place of play; a home first and office second. A true Home Office.

Covid has taken away the play from our home homes, so we need to rebalance that when it’s over Rover.

You are a successful leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

An early work experience introduced me to the importance of balancing playfulness with intention and purpose to create meaningful experiences and successful outcomes.

My first job in design was to reinvent a mass market out of town furniture store. Embarrassed by my elitism, I couldn't conceive how anyone would buy this junk, but I tried. Nor could I comprehend the patronizing banality of these locations, so I sold the idea of cheering it up with the unexpected frivolity of placing 20-foot-tall topiary armchairs to announce the carpark entrance. But I detailed them badly, and without visiting the site, placed them at the goods in, not customer entrance. Thankfully, no one noticed, and I continued employment with some sternly written "note to self" memos: "Play is only for children if not balanced with rigor, sobriety and function."

For the benefit of our readers, can you briefly let us know why you are an authority about the topic of finding joy?

Reinventing normal. I'm really not. But I do find joy in ideas realized or the impossible considered, in reinventing normal.

I can recognize joy when it passes by, enjoy its company when it visits, but never mope when it leaves. I'm not actively looking. It's an elusive beast to play hide and seek with.

But I do gain joy from recognizing and grasping at ideas others might not, introducing them without prejudice and seeing if they become friends. I have some influence now so sometimes people listen and then act on what some others might consider whims. They're not. They are often just unconnected ideas caught in the same net. We call it reinventing normal, but often it's just common sense, or not about patronizing people with complacent mediocrity, the "way we've always done things around here," or the rejection of the predictably banal.

Our lives can change in a nanosecond and so "Reinventing Normal" is just a process where everything is challenged, broken down and if needs, be discarded. Yesterday's starting point may have no relevance today, but equally we sometimes forget the simple things that worked so well. What results is the reinvention of any vernacular that we are working in, often with spectacular commercial results, and often for the joy of people.

Apart from a Scotsman with a drink in his hand and one in his belly, I really can't imagine anything more joyful or charming, more of the sum of everything vital and good about humanity, than a market or more degraded than a "super" one. So that's my job. Reinventing something better. It may have existed before. It may be entirely new but most often it has human connection and empathy and egalitarianism at its core. Another reason why I love markets.

Ok, thank you for all of that. Let's now shift to the main focus of our interview about finding joy. Even before the pandemic hit, the United States was ranked at #19 in the World Happiness Report. Can you share a few reasons why you think the ranking is so low, despite all of the privileges and opportunities that we have in the US?

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I believe we all need to actively consider this community thing, what we are doing with it right now and if we are moving in the right direction as a race. "The Second Coming," by William Butler Yeats, is a brilliant expression of this...and timeless, too. I'd insist it was read and learned with Coleridge's Kubla Khan for light, but inspiring relief.

What are the main myths or misconceptions you'd like to dispel about finding joy and happiness? Can you please share some stories or examples?

Joy isn't as noisy as you're taught to believe. So sometimes when it comes unannounced, if distracted, you can miss it. I don't think you find it, nor is it a constant state, or it'd become an addiction. It comes mainly to visit when you least expect, sort of just drops by.

That said, sometimes it can be noisy and annoying, more like an emotional exclamation mark or a foghorn during a riverside picnic. It shocks, and sometimes surprises and then becomes a pleasure.

In design it's a response, a smile on a customer's face, a grateful mini-pleasure or a risk rewarded. It's nearly always something human, a connection or surprise.

In a related, but slightly different question, what are the main mistakes you have seen people make when they try to find happiness? Can you please share some stories or examples?

I've never observed someone trying to find happiness, but I've meet loads who think they should. It must be a terrible way to start a day and I think its search kind of negates the gifts when presented.

As a designer I try and recognize what might elicit joy and then go into bat for it. If you believe in something, then it's never a shallow manufactured way as corporations sometimes try. But this requires a conversation with our clients and then theirs with their team, so everyone gets it. I'm a big fan of benign dictatorships and working with people of vision. Luckily, we stayed small but big enough to have these conversations with some great leaders of some great companies. It's a joy to work with people that, confident in their abilities, take their responsibilities seriously but not themselves. That's a joy. There are less grown-ups out there than you might think.

Please share “5 things you need to live with more Joie De Vivre, more joy and happiness in life, particularly during turbulent times?” (Please share a story or an example for each.)

- The sea. I'd miss it if it wasn't on my doorstep or me on its. It greets me every morning and soothes me every night.
- Black coffee at sunrise.
- Friendly birds and all animals. They're such delightful buffoons.
- The banter of English comedians.
- Rikki, my wife's chuckle, and four children. That's five.

What can concerned friends, colleagues, and life partners do to effectively help support someone they care about who is feeling down or depressed?

There's no constant state of emotions. Feelings fluctuate with the ups and downs of personal circumstances and experiences. Joy doesn't happen all the time but should be embraced when it arrives but shrugged off when it leaves, or else it'd lose its charm. I buy into karma and balance, so I suppose all emotions were likely invented to complement each other, even despair.

Ok, we are nearly done. You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

I'd rename the smart phone and then when I wake up, I'd put it to better use. While doing this I'd encourage people to look up and around instead of down and back. I'd encourage reading and the smelling of books, mainly history, and talking and listening in equal measure. I think community is our greatest gift so libraries would need to be rethought.

The search for the classic and the classics themselves are very important to me, things of worth that stand within and through time, and low embedded energy too. They are less distracting than fashion which should be banned during the working day. And I'd happily wear a uniform as it simplifies choices and focuses what little energy we have on matters of more importance. Or a silver jumpsuit if we want to look like a modern team. Thanks, Jerry.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22YG6dST_yM

We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we both tag them :-)

I think it would be weird to meet someone who you admire so much you'd be able to overcome the embarrassment of meeting this illusion for breakfast. So, it'd probably be someone I know already and miss. Reality is often the best gift.

But if I had to choose it'd be an illusion because he's passed, so it'd likely be Muhammad Ali, a deeply flawed but brilliant man, funny and wise. It's a characteristic I admire; being really outstanding at something but self-depreciating at the same time. A supremely spatially aware dancer, poet of a kind, and man of unexpected solutions and great lateral thought. His beating of Foreman was a thing of genius. He used his gifts beyond how others imagined they could be employed and turned them into a vision of uniqueness yet matched. He was both principled and flawed and, actually, he was a great salesman too. He often predicted the outcome before the fight, to himself as well as his opponent.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

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Thank you for these really excellent insights, and we greatly appreciate the time you spent with this. We wish you continued success and good health!