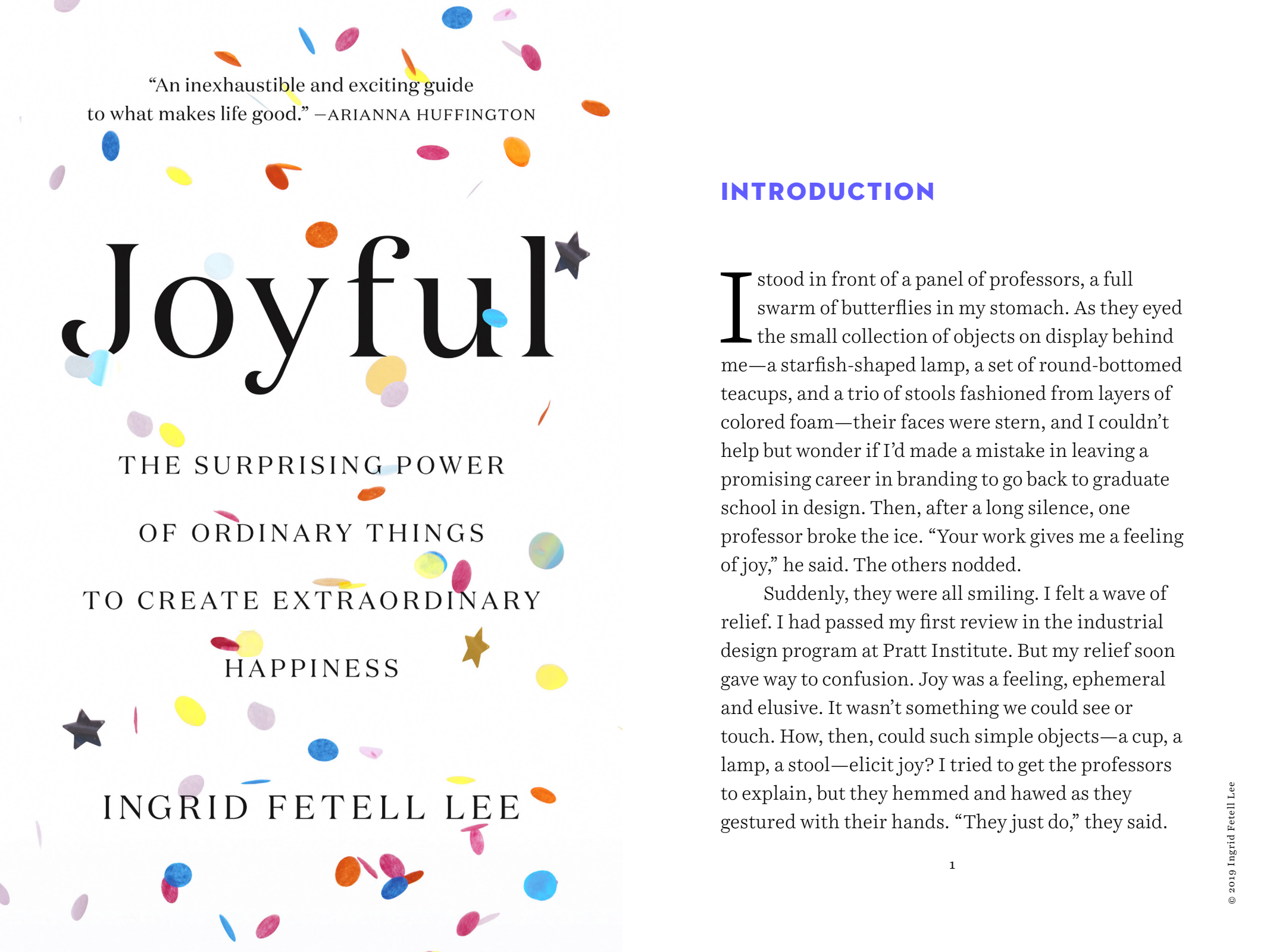




“An inexhaustible and exciting guide
to what makes life good.” —ARIANNA HUFFINGTON

Joyful

THE SURPRISING POWER
OF ORDINARY THINGS
TO CREATE EXTRAORDINARY
HAPPINESS

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INTRODUCTION

I stood in front of a panel of professors, a full swarm of butterflies in my stomach. As they eyed the small collection of objects on display behind me—a starfish-shaped lamp, a set of round-bottomed teacups, and a trio of stools fashioned from layers of colored foam—their faces were stern, and I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d made a mistake in leaving a promising career in branding to go back to graduate school in design. Then, after a long silence, one professor broke the ice. “Your work gives me a feeling of joy,” he said. The others nodded.

Suddenly, they were all smiling. I felt a wave of relief. I had passed my first review in the industrial design program at Pratt Institute. But my relief soon gave way to confusion. Joy was a feeling, ephemeral and elusive. It wasn’t something we could see or touch. How, then, could such simple objects—a cup, a lamp, a stool—elicit joy? I tried to get the professors to explain, but they hemmed and hawed as they gestured with their hands. “They just do,” they said.

I thanked them, but as I packed up my things for the summer, I couldn't stop thinking about this question.

How do tangible things create an intangible feeling of joy?

At first, the answer seemed unequivocal: They don't. Sure, there's a certain pleasure in material things, but I'd always been led to believe that this is superficial and short-lived, not a meaningful source of joy. In all the books on happiness that I'd consulted over the years, no one had ever suggested that joy might be hiding inside my closet or kitchen cabinets. Instead, countless experts agree that the kind of joy that matters is not around us but in us. This perspective has roots in ancient philosophical traditions. The teachings of Buddha, for example, advise that happiness comes only from letting go of our attachments to worldly things, while in ancient Greece the Stoic philosophers offered a similar prescription, rooted in self-denial and rigorous control over one's thoughts. Modern psychology likewise embraces this inward lens, suggesting that the way to a happy life is to change how we look at the world and our place in it. From mantras and meditation to therapy and habit change, true joy is an exercise of mind over matter, not matter over

mind. Yet in the weeks and months that followed my review, I noticed many moments when people seemed to find real joy in the material world. Gazing at a favorite painting in an art museum or making a sandcastle at the beach, people smiled and laughed, lost in the moment. They smiled, too, at the peachy light of the sunset and at the shaggy dog with the yellow galoshes. And not only did people seem to find joy in the world around them, but many also put a lot of effort into making their immediate environment more delightful. They tended rose gardens, put candles on birthday cakes, and hung lights for the holidays. Why would people do these things if they had no real effect on their happiness?

A body of research is emerging that demonstrates a clear link between our surroundings and our mental health. For example, studies show that people with sunny workspaces sleep better and laugh more than their peers in dimly lit offices, and that flowers improve not only people's moods but their memory as well. As I delved deeper into these findings, joy started to become less amorphous and abstract to me and more tangible and real. It no longer seemed difficult to attain, the result of years of introspection or disciplined practice. Instead, I began to see the

world as a reservoir of positivity that I could turn to at any time. I found that certain places have a kind of buoyancy—a bright corner café, a local yarn shop, a block of brownstones whose window boxes overflow with blooms—and I started changing my routines to visit them more often. On bad days, rather than feeling overwhelmed and helpless, I discovered small things that could reliably lift my spirits. I started incorporating what I learned into my home and began to feel a sense of excitement as I put my key into the lock each evening. Over time, it became clear to me that the conventional wisdom about joy was wrong.

Joy isn't hard to find at all. In fact, it's all around us.

The liberating awareness of this simple truth changed my life. As I started to share it with others, I found that many people felt the impulse to seek joy in their surroundings but had been made to feel as if their efforts were misguided. One woman told me that buying cut flowers lifted her spirits for days, but she felt like it was a frivolous indulgence, so she only did it on special occasions. It had never occurred to her that for the price of one of her weekly therapy sessions, she could buy a bunch of flowers every other week for a year. Another described how she had

walked into her living room after repainting it and felt an “ahhh” feeling—a sense of relief and lightness that made her wonder why she had waited so long to do it. I realized that we all have an inclination to seek joy in our surroundings, yet we have been taught to ignore it. What might happen if we were to reawaken this instinct for finding joy?

I needed to know exactly how the physical world influences our emotions and why certain things spark a feeling of joy. I began asking everyone I knew, as well as quite a few strangers on the street, to tell me about the objects or places they associated with joy. Some things were specific and personal: “my grandmother’s kitchen,” “a signed Grateful Dead poster,” “the canoe at the house we used to go to on Lake Michigan.” Some were shaped by cultural heritage or upbringing, like favorite foods or sports teams. But others were neither personal nor cultural in origin. A friend of mine told me about a summer afternoon when she got caught in a sudden downpour on her way home from work. She took refuge under an awning with a motley crew of others who had been caught without umbrellas, making guesses as to how long the storm would last. It passed after a few minutes, and people began to venture out onto

the sidewalk, when suddenly a man shouted, “Look!” A brilliant rainbow was arcing across the sky, right over the Empire State Building. People stopped and stared, their wet clothes clinging to them, big grins on their faces.

I heard countless variations on this story. The day was frigid or steamy, the people were friends or strangers, the rainbow was over a concert or a mountaintop or a sailboat. Everywhere, it seems, rainbows are joyful. I began to make a list of things like this, ones that I heard over and over again: beach balls and fireworks, swimming pools and treehouses, hot-air balloons and googly eyes and ice-cream sundaes with colorful sprinkles. These pleasures cut across lines of age, gender, and ethnicity. They weren’t joyful for just a few people. They were joyful for nearly everyone. I gathered pictures of these things and pinned them up on my studio wall. Each day I spent a few minutes adding new images, sorting them into categories and looking for patterns.

One day as I was studying the images, something clicked. I saw lollipops, pom-poms, and polka dots, and it dawned on me: they were all round in shape. Vibrant quilts kept company with Matisse paintings and rainbow candies: all bursting

with saturated color. A picture of a cathedral’s rose window puzzled me at first, but when I placed it next to a snowflake and a sunflower, it made sense: all had radiating symmetries. And the common thread among bubbles, balloons, and hummingbirds also became clear: they were all things that floated gently in the air. Seeing it all laid out, I realized that though the feeling of joy is mysterious and ephemeral, we can access it through tangible, physical attributes. Specifically, it is what designers call aesthetics—the properties that define the way an object looks and feels—that give rise to the feeling of joy.

Up until this point, I had always thought of aesthetics as decorative, even a bit frivolous. I had come to design school because I wanted to make things that changed people’s lives for the better. I was obsessed with finding ways to make my products ergonomic, functional, and eco-friendly. And while I enjoyed the classes on how to work with color and texture, shape and movement, I treated these elements as extras, not essentials. This attitude is common in our culture. Though we pay a fair amount of attention to aesthetics, we’re not supposed to care too much about them or put too much effort into appearances. If we do, we risk seeming

shallow or insubstantial. How many times have you complimented a fashionable friend, only to hear her say, “Oh, this old thing? It’s just something I threw together!” Yet when I looked at the aesthetics on my studio wall, I realized they were far more than just decorative. They elicited a deep, emotional response.

In all, I identified ten aesthetics of joy, each of which reveals a distinct connection between the feeling of joy and the tangible qualities of the world around us:

Energy: vibrant color and light

Abundance: lushness, multiplicity, and variety

Freedom: nature, wildness, and open space

Harmony: balance, symmetry, and flow

Play: circles, spheres, and bubbly forms

Surprise: contrast and whimsy

Transcendence: elevation and lightness

Magic: invisible forces and illusions

Celebration: synchrony, sparkle, and bursting shapes

Renewal: blossoming, expansion, and curves

What is the relationship between these aesthetics and our emotions? And why do these particular aesthetics stimulate feelings of joy? These questions sparked a journey that led me to some of

the most joyful places in the world. In these pages, we’ll visit a treehouse bed-and-breakfast and a city transformed by color, an apartment designed to prevent aging and a seaside mansion made entirely of spheres. We’ll look at natural wonders, like the opening of the cherry blossoms in Japan, and man-made ones, like the rising of hundreds of hot-air balloons over the Albuquerque desert. Along the way, I’ll share insights from new research in the fields of psychology and neuroscience that helps explain why these places and experiences have such power to unlock joy within us.

But ultimately, *Joyful* isn’t about seeking joy in the far-flung corners of the world. It’s about finding more joy right where you are. In the following pages, you’ll meet celebrated artists and designers —architects, interior designers, color specialists, gardeners, quilters, DIYers, florists, and even an artist who works with balloons—and learn their secrets for finding and creating joy in every aspect of the physical world. And you’ll get to know real people who are making joy in their homes and communities—cottages and camper vans, living rooms and office cubicles, sidewalks and rec centers—to see how small changes can infuse

ordinary objects and places with extraordinary joy.

You have a whole world of joy right at your fingertips. There's no method you need to learn, no discipline you need to impose on yourself. The only requirement is what you already have: an openness to discovering the joy that surrounds you.



In my years as design director at the renowned innovation company IDEO and in my own practice, as well as through curating the design blog *The Aesthetics of Joy*, I've seen firsthand how aesthetics change people's attitudes and behavior from the outside in. They reveal why some stores and restaurants bustle with activity, while others stand quiet and empty. And they help us understand why one environment makes people anxious and competitive, while another brims with sociability and tolerance. Think about the way people act in the sterile cabin of an airplane, breaking into fights over three degrees of seat recline and jostling elbows for control of an armrest. Now contrast this with how people behave in the convivial atmosphere of a music festival. Surrounded by vibrant decorations

and music, people share food and drink, make space on the crowded lawn for newcomers, and dance with strangers. The power of the aesthetics of joy is that they speak directly to our unconscious minds, bringing out the best in us without our even being aware of it.

How can you tell if your surroundings are joyful or not? There's no exact standard, but think about these questions:

How often do you laugh?

When was the last time you felt a true, unfettered moment of joy?

What emotions do you feel when you walk into your home at the end of the day? How about when you enter each room?

How highly does your significant other or family value joy? Who are the most joyful people in your life? How often do you see them?

How often do you find joy in your work?

Do you work for a company that is pro-joy, joy-neutral, or anti-joy?

How appropriate is it to laugh out loud at your workplace?

What activities bring you the most joy? How often do you engage in them? Can you do them at or near your home?

How much joy do you find in the town or city where you

live? In your specific neighborhood?

What are your “happy places”? Are any within ten miles of your home? When was the last time you visited one?

Every human being is born with the capacity for joy, and like the pilot light in your stove, it still burns within you even if you haven’t switched on the burners in a while. What you hold in your hands is the key to reigniting those joyful flames, one that promises to radically change the way you look at the world around you. At the heart of this book lies the idea that joy isn’t just something we find. It’s also something we can make, for ourselves and for those around us.

You can use this book as a field guide to spotting and savoring more joy in your surroundings, to help you gain a better understanding of why certain things and places light you up inside. And you can also use it as a palette, to design and craft more joy into your world. The chapters build on one another, so the book will probably make the most sense if you read them in order. But don’t let that stop you from jumping to an aesthetic that is calling your name. You may just want to flip back later to see what you missed.

You will probably find that some aesthetics

speak to you more than others. If you’re a nature lover, you might find yourself especially drawn to freedom, for example. If you happen to be afraid of heights, then some aspects of the transcendence aesthetic may not be for you. You may also find that the aesthetics that feel best change depending on where you are and what’s going on in your life. A drab office may benefit from an infusion of energy, while the harmony aesthetic can bring joy to a hectic family home. When the kids leave the nest, however, that same home might need some of the play aesthetic to make it feel lively again.

Feel free to mix, match, and layer aesthetics to create an experience that brings you joy. There are no specific rules, but to help you feel your way through, I’ve tried to note where aesthetics are particularly complementary and where they may be in tension. Though some chapters describe particular products that can help bring the aesthetics to life, you don’t need to buy anything expensive to transform a space in a joyful way. In the last chapter, you’ll find a Joyful Toolkit, full of guides and worksheets designed to help you apply the ideas in this book to your own space and your own life.

Too often, we move through the physical world

as if it were a stage set, a mute backdrop for our daily activities. Yet in reality it is alive with opportunities for inspiration, wonder, and joy. I hope this book empowers you to see more of these opportunities in the world around you and to seize them. Joy's power is that small moments can spark big changes. A whimsical outfit might prompt a smile, which inspires a chance kindness toward a stranger, which helps someone who is struggling to get through her day. Even the tiniest joyful gestures add up over time, and before we know it, we have not just a few happier people but a truly joyful world.

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