The Bill Walton Show

Episode 89: Why Ayn Rand Matters Today with Tal Tsfany

Bill Walton (00:00):

I'm here today to talk about something I've been really interested in for a long time. I was a big fan of Ayn Rand as a kid. I read her novels, Atlas Shrugged, Fountainhead and admired her protagonists rugged individualists. Though the thing that struck me about that was she was so dedicated to being an atheist. This was a Godless world, everything was created by man and I just don't believe that. In particular, I've been spending some time with Dennis Prager's books. He's going to be writing five books on the tour and he's started his first two.

Bill Walton (00:39):

It's called The Rational Bible about Genesis and Exodus. In it, he gets into the source of truth, which is God's truth. He believes, and I guess I believe, that he did write the first five books of the Bible. But as I point out in the show, I'm not a professional intellectual. I'm a, I guess what my guests and the talent I talk about, I'm more of an intellectual professional. So I'm on a journey to understand this and I think I learned a lot today in a conversation that I'm having with Tai and I hope you'll join me. Welcome to The Bill Walton Show.

Speaker 2 (01:23):

Welcome to the Bill Walton Show, featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and thinkers. Fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics and human flourishing. Interesting people. Interesting things.

Bill Walton (<u>01:45</u>):

Welcome back. I'm Bill Walton and we're here today to talk about Ayn Rand. Most of us have read her novels, particularly Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead. They're terrific reads, but I have been surprised to learn how much her ideas and philosophy has resonated throughout the worlds in the years, decades, I think, 70, 80 years since those novels were first published. To learn more about this, I've asked Tai Tsfany, who's the president and CEO of Ayn Rand Institute to come on the show and talk about Ayn Rand's philosophy and why it resonates so much in today's world. Tai, welcome.

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Tal Tsfany (<u>02:27</u>):
Thank you, Bill. It's great to be here.
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Tai, you're in Alpharetta, Georgia right now as we're doing this via Zoom?

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Tal Tsfany (02:34):
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Bill Walton (02:30):

Yep. You can see the woods in the back.

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Bill Walton (<u>02:37</u>):
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It's beautiful. Can you get a haircut in Georgia now?

Tal Tsfany (02:41):

Yes, you can. Actually, we're leading the way in opening up and you can get a haircut. You can get your nails done. You can choose.

Bill Walton (02:49):

Well, I'm into my 18th week without a haircut. So we may do our next show down there so I can get a little trimmer. So you've had an interesting journey to come to the Ayn Rand Institute. I knew it when Yaron Brook was firing it up. I think he started it in about 15, 20 years ago and he's now chairman.

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Tal Tsfany (<u>03:10</u>):
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Right.

Bill Walton (03:12):

You're the co-founder of the Ayn Rand Institute in Israel.

Tal Tsfany (03:16):

Right.

Bill Walton (03:16):

The journey you've taken from Israel to be president of the Ayn Rand Institute is an extremely interesting one. You want to talk about that?

Tal Tsfany (03:26):

Yeah. My journey starts as a kid in Israel, in the South part of Israel in a city called Be'er Shava. I was always a very questioning kid and later on, I figured out it was more of a philosophical kid who was asking a lot of philosophical questions. I was a normal kid up until the age of 13 when my mother decided we need to move to a kibbutz. Now, I don't know if you know what a kibbutz is. It means a commune in Hebrew and Russian immigrants thought that when they migrate to Israel now they'll try and establish the right communist settlement, right? They'll get it right this time.

Bill Walton (04:16):

And the kibbutz is based on purely communist or purely socialist principles?

Tal Tsfany (<u>04:22</u>):

Yes, completely. No private property. You're part of the commune. Everybody works. Everybody's equal. I actually had a number when I moved there at the age of nine. I was Tai 318 and everything is shared. Even I, as a kid, I was not the property of my parents. I grew up in a kid's house. We didn't have any grades because you're not allowed to be better than anyone else. At the age of 13, I got a present from my family in the city.

Tal Tsfany (<u>04:54</u>):

I got a tape recorder, a stereo. I put it in my room and then a committee decided that I cannot keep it in my room because it's not equal and that if I wanted to keep it, that was the compromise. I have to let everybody, all my friends play their cassettes on it. And I said, "I'm not having any of that." So I tried to

convince my parents to leave. It took me a couple of years, but we left when I was 15, 16. I didn't have the ammunition to explain why this is so wrong. It just felt [crosstalk 00:05:31].

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Bill Walton (05:31):
So you were showing early signs of individualism.
Tal Tsfany (05:34):
Yes. Yes. Exactly.
Bill Walton (05:37):
So from the kibbutz, how long were you all in the kibbutz?
Tal Tsfany (05:42):
From nine till about 16.
Bill Walton (05:44):
Till about 16? Then you went to a flight academy?
Tal Tsfany (05:49):
Yes. Then I went to the Israeli Army. I started in the flight academy, ended up in operations and
intelligence and then did what every good Jewish boy should do, because that's the expectation is to go
either be a lawyer or an engineer or something like that. So I became a software engineer. In the
process while I was a student, I started teaching SAT prep courses and I was very good at it. I started
climbing up the ranks in that company until when I graduated, the owner offered me the CEO position.
So I was a very young CEO, 26, 27 of the largest private education company in Israel and that-
Bill Walton (06:32):
What was the name of it?
Tal Tsfany (06:35):
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It was called Kidum. It means advancement in Hebrew.

Bill Walton (<u>06:38</u>):

And you were teaching Israeli kids to take the SAT.

Tal Tsfany (<u>06:41</u>):

Exactly. So I did that and I loved it. I loved everything about education and it's relevant because later on it explains where I landed. But I love that education from the day I started working, everything around education. I was a substitute teacher in a middle school when I was younger and I loved that as well. Long story short, I did that for several years and then I had an opportunity to go to a big software company. That's how I ended up here in Atlanta, Georgia, because I was working as a software manager, a VP in a large 22,000 people company who did the projects for AT&T. AT&T information technology department is right here in Alpharetta, Georgia. If you remember, there was a project that I did that everybody knows called rollover minutes that AT&T had a while back, if you remember that.

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Bill Walton (07:41):
Sure. That was you?
Tal Tsfany (07:44):
Yes. That's part of it.
Bill Walton (07:47):
I've always wanted to meet that guy.
Tal Tsfany (<u>07:47</u>):
You never think about those things when you hear about who's behind it. Anyway, so I did software for
many, many years, and then one day a colleague of mine, we were having a discussion. Then she says,
"You're so sure of yourself. You're like an Ayn Rand," and it's like, "Who's Ayn Rand?" He's like, "You're
kidding me. You haven't read Ayn Rand?" I said, "No." He says, "You have to." Then I ended up meeting
Atlas Shrugged or meeting John Galt and that's-
Bill Walton (08:20):
If you had snuck Ayn Rand onto the kibbutz, you really would have been in trouble.
Tal Tsfany (<u>08:25</u>):
Oh yeah. Talk about oil and water, right? Although-
Bill Walton (08:32):
How old were you when you first read Ayn Rand?
Tal Tsfany (<u>08:35</u>):
40.
Bill Walton (08:36):
40, okay.
Tal Tsfany (08:37):
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Nine years ago. So the experience of reading Atlas was a physical reaction because again, I think something clicked in my head where it was obvious to me very early in the book that she's trying to tell me something deeper than just the narrative and the plot of what's going on with Dagney and John Galt and Hank Reardon. So I remember I was pacing in the room. I couldn't sit down reading that book because it's like, this is nuclear material. This is something deeper than the book. I had to leave the book about a third way in and say, "What is she trying to say?"

Tal Tsfany (<u>09:16</u>):

Then I Googled and I figured out she was an originator of a new philosophy called objectivism. It goes against the mysticism of the religious doctrines and philosophies and goes against the subjectivism of the left, where everything goes and we have a collective mind and our feelings should lead the way. She says, "This is wrong and this is wrong. We need a scientific approach to philosophy." That really clicked

with me because, as an engineer, someone who tries to understand the world as it is, that was perfect for me, so ...

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Bill Walton (09:49):
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So the notion is there's objectivism, there's an objective reality that is unchanging, real, everlasting versus the left, which is subjective, relative. Everything is what individuals think and feel without a-

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Tal Tsfany (10:07):
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You create reality in your mind, in a way, yes. That had a huge impact on me.

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Bill Walton (10:17):
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So where did you go from there having had your epiphany to end up where you are now, which is a pretty great place?

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Tal Tsfany (<u>10:25</u>):
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I went to the Fountainhead. It's right there. You see, it's a version of the Fountainhead behind me, and then I had Howard Roark and Howard Roark's really-

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Bill Walton (10:33):
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That's a copy of the Fountainhead book and there-

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Tal Tsfany (<u>10:38</u>):
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It's actually a lamp. It's a lamp of the Fountainhead with [crosstalk 00:10:42].

Bill Walton (10:41):

That's great. So the Fountainhead that had Gary Cooper and Patricia O'Neal.

Tal Tsfany (10:49):

Yes.

Bill Walton (10:50):

Great casting.

Tal Tsfany (10:52):

The movie from the '40s. But the thing about his, his character is like an ideal of a person with high self-esteem, super clear about what they want out of life, an uncompromising character. Suddenly I was like, what ... it made me introspect about my life. Where am I? What am I doing with my life? The only limited resource of time, where's it going? I decided that where I am is not where I want to be, but I need to start an introspective process of understanding what my values are. What do I want to do? What does my consciousness find interesting and attractive in this world?

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Tal Tsfany (11:32):
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I started a very deep, almost like a self-analysis process. Because I'm a man of action, I just started moving forward. The first thing I did is decided to leave my job and join my brother-in-law in a startup

company that he started, a software company. So I started working in Chicago and that was great because it felt like I'm doing something of my own, something that I believe in, but that's what started the journey. Then we moved the company from Chicago to the Silicon Valley and it was a great success. The company was sold last year. It grew to over 200 people and it was a great success.

Tal Tsfany (<u>12:10</u>):

But in that process, what really mattered is that I continuously evolved in understanding that what life is about, it's about seeking values. It's the pursuit of happiness, as Jefferson put it. Happiness is an, and this is an Ayn Rand definition, is that state of consciousness, which proceeds from the achievement of one's values. So the process that I started working with is what are my values? That's the hardest part, by the way, figuring out what your values are and then going and seeking them and being serious about it. Then developing the character and the self esteem and the pride that comes with the fact that you know that you're working in a very ethical way, according to the objectivist ethics of have having purpose and independence and so on and so forth. And maybe later on I'll tell you how ended up [crosstalk 00:12:59].

Bill Walton (13:01):

Where's God in this?

Tal Tsfany (13:05):

Where's God in this. Me and God had an interesting relationship in the beginning of my life because I need to understand where things are. My grandmother, at the age of six, asked me to put the yamaka on. I remember I asked her, "Why should I put the yamaka on," and she said, "Because God is looking at you from above and you need to respect him." I said, "Great, but where is He?" Then I remember I went to my uncle's room in her house and I closed the door and I said, "God, you have a minute to show up and if you show up, I'll believe in you and I'll pray for you every day," because I was a serious kid, but he chose not to show up.

Tal Tsfany (<u>13:48</u>):

Then I went back and I gave her back the yamaka and I said, "I need proof," and that's going back to me being very philosophical. What I learned later on is that we all have to have a philosophy of life. We're not like animals. We're not coming to this world programmed with what we should do. Because of that, it creates a void that you have to fill with some code of guidance of how to pursue your life and that is really complicated. Nobody teaches us how to do it.

Tal Tsfany (<u>14:19</u>):

Now, when you look at the words, you don't see the good. It's called the is-ought gap in technical terms in philosophy. The gap between the is, what you see, and the ought, it's not there. So Ayn Rand calls religions primitive philosophies. She said we had to have them. People came up with them because it's a necessity. You have to have a philosophy. But as with science, you progress over time and you learn more about the world.

Tal Tsfany (14:51):

What she said is that from a metaphysical perspective, if you define the good as whatever promotes human life, your life and replace the good as a given with the standard of life, suddenly there's no real need for God, because you can close the is-ought gap. You can derive from the standard of value of life,

the ought, the fact that you have to have an independent mind. It's wrong to kill people. I remember seeing a Prager University video that says, "If God doesn't exist, then murder is good." Well, Ayn Rand says ... Oh, she challenges that.

Bill Walton (15:36):

There's so many of her ethics that I do agree with and so much of the worldview and the individualism that I'm aligned with. You mentioned Dennis Prager. I'm in the midst of reading the first two books he's written on what he calls The Rational Bible: Exodus and writes about Genesis as well. I'm a believer and I think our values don't exist. I don't think we create these. They do have an objective reality, but I'd say that objective reality comes from God. This is where you and I-

Tal Tsfany (<u>16:11</u>):

Well that's a ...

Bill Walton (16:12):

Continue. This is a conversation, not an oration. I might add you and I talked about this before. I'm not a professional intellectual. We joked earlier. I'm what you'd call it an intellectual professional than I'm a CEO. So I don't bring a library to this discussion. It's more just my instincts about what's real and what isn't. So anyway, continue. Sorry to interrupt.

Tal Tsfany (16:40):

I'm not a professional intellectual myself. I consider myself more of an intellectual professional that is now dealing with intellectual topics. Look, Ayn Rand, for me, did one major thing, which is she organized the world and she says, "Philosophy is the most profound thing ... " or, "The mother of all sciences in the sense that it defines the relationship between man and reality." She says, "The first layer is metaphysics, which answers the questions, where are we? What is this thing? Is it real?"

Tal Tsfany (17:13):

Then she says, "The second layer is epistemology, which is how do I know reality?" It's introducing human consciousness and tries to see the relationship between reality and human consciousness. For me, that is the critical aspect of understanding life. Then once you know reality and man, you can derive morality and then from there on, you can ask the question, how should we live in a society which is politics. There's a fifth branch to philosophy called aesthetics, which is why this sculpture is here.

Tal Tsfany (17:44):

What is the meaning of art and why art is like food for the soul of a conceptual being? What we discussed a minute ago is the metaphysical question of where are we? Is this thing real? Are there other dimensions? Are there entities in other dimensions? Actually, it relates to an epistemological question of how do we know and how do we determine what's true and what's not? It's very deep and it took me years to understand this, so I don't expect people in a 30-minute conversation to understand [crosstalk 00:18:19]

Bill Walton (18:20):

Let me back up a little bit towards how many people are involved with the Ayn Rand Institute? It's based in California. You're in Alpharetta. We're all working virtually. That makes sense. How big is the Institute and what is its mission?

Tal Tsfany (<u>18:40</u>):

So we're about 35 people in the Institute now. It's a pretty sizable organization, very active. The mission and the charter of the Institute is to protect the legacy of Ayn Rand. We have the Ayn Rand archives, the Ayn Rand papers. If you come to our lobby, you will see the desk on which she wrote all of her novels. It's really something. On top of that, we're an educational institution. We're spreading her philosophy of objectivism. That's what we do.

Tal Tsfany (19:12):

So we have all the way from five-minute videos of Who is Ayn Rand? To a three year program called The Objectivist Academic Center, where we teach new philosophers and intellectuals about the deep philosophy of Ayn Rand. What people don't appreciate about her is that she created a whole system and there are very few, a handful of people in the history of the human race that created a full philosophy, start to finish, and she's based everything on Aristotle. So she gives Aristotle the credit and then in [crosstalk 00:19:46]

Bill Walton (19:46):

Would objectivism be a religion?

Tal Tsfany (19:50):

No, it's never a religion because religion is based on faith and she rejects faith. She says she's an advocate of reason. She sees the world divided into two, the Plato kind of view of the world, which is more mystic and the Aristotle view of the world. So Plato with his hand up and Aristotle with his hand down. Reason is almost a negation of faith. It means that you have to explain to me and prove to me with logical terms, what you claim is true. If you go outside of that realm, then you're in faith land and her most basic virtue in objectivism is rationality.

Bill Walton (20:39):

Depending on how you look at it, I'm a contrarian. We've got an establishment clause in the U.S. Constitution which talks about the establishment of a religion. I have come to believe that in a way, what we've got is an establishment of religion and it's secular humanism or it's environmentalism or it's whatever ism that people are pushing. For example, the environmental movement seems to be, in most cases, an article of faith, rather than, as they would say, science. It's not science, at least as I understand science. Instead, it's faith-based. So how do we wander into this world of Ayn Rand where we have the objective reality versus faith and yet we've got these human institutions on the left that seem to be very much like religions?

Tal Tsfany (21:34):

That's what she says and the problem with Ayn Rand is that everybody loves to hate her. She's hated, of course, on the left because she attacks them at the core. She's not really loved at the right as well, although a lot of people get inspired by her because she attacks the faith-based metaphysics of the right. So in my mind, she's out of that dimension of right and left. It's really hard to get her. For me, it's almost like Newton created a world of physics and then Einstein came and said, "Oh, you're all looking

at it from a completely wrong angle," and created a whole new way of looking at physics and general relativity, in a way, built on Newton. If you take her politics, for instance, she's not on the right, not on the left. She said, "Everybody's wrong."

Tal Tsfany (22:28):

The closest thing you can get is the Founding Fathers. They were really political scientists who understand that the individual, the individual is the only unit of the human society, because we're also different from each other, because we have this machine here, the conceptual ability that makes us as different as from ants as possible. So once you try to get us together and mesh to ... that's when we break. She says that the Founding Fathers got it right, that this is why she calls America the most moral, benevolent society ever existed and she shows that. She proves that.

Bill Walton (23:08):

Well, I would happen to agree the Founding Fathers did create the most moral society on the planet and we've got to work pretty hard to keep that. So we're very much aligned there, but I guess if it's not a religion that you do have followers or devotees to her philosophy, how many millions of people around the world would share your views?

Tal Tsfany (23:35):

It's hard to say. It's a group of individualists. It's hard to put them together. It's funny that most of my donors-

Bill Walton (23:41):

You can't get them all in one room.

Tal Tsfany (23:43):

Exactly. I think we're talking about hundreds of thousands of people that are really in agreement and dove into her nonfiction. But most of our donors, for instance, are just individuals living their life and they're not really interested in changing the world. They're like Howard Roark, they're living their life the best they can. It's a movement. It is a movement. We do want to change the world for the better. We do want to promote objectivism and reason and individualism and capitalism, laissez-faire capitalism, by the way. This is what she advocates.

Bill Walton (24:24):

Well, she became very controversial with the publication of The Virtues of Selfishness, where she goes right at Christianity. Explain what she was driving at there. I think I've got it, but I'd rather hear you say it.

Tal Tsfany (24:43):

I don't know that she's going against Christianity. She goes to define or try to take back the meaning of the word selfish. By that, she calls it a package deal. When I give you a package deal, there's good and bad in it. So she takes the word selfishness, she opens it up and she says, "What's inside?" One is regard for self, care for self, promote your life, which everybody's good. You promote your life. You woke up this morning and you did whatever you needed to do to take care of yourself and promote your values. That's rational, let's call it rational self-interest.

Tal Tsfany (25:22):

But together with it, they patch together this backstabbing, not caring for other people mentality. If you package two things together in one concept, then the mind cannot separate them. So she's saying, "Let's understand that." Going back to America. America was founded on the concept that you have the right for your own life and your own happiness, and that's very egoistic, but it doesn't mean anything about your relationship with other people. On the contrary, the reason why America became the most benevolent charitable society is just because of that. That if you follow reason, then your relationship with other people becomes a trader principle is what she calls it. So she's trying-

Bill Walton (26:12):

The trader principle, though, I'm thinking of Adam Smith and I'm thinking it's not from the virtues or ... I can't remember the exact word or the Baker or the Shoemaker that the market works, but it's from them pursuing their own self interest as they define it. Because of that, you end up with a voluntary exchange and voluntary exchange the basis of market economy, which creates the most wealth and freedom of any form of economic organization. It's not only an economic order, but it's a moral order.

Tal Tsfany (<u>26:41</u>):

Exactly.

Bill Walton (26:42):

So there's a lot of alignment just she's taken God out of the formula, whereas Adam Smith didn't. But for purposes of our conversation, it seems to me that the principles of the free market, the entrepreneurship, all the sort of things those of us would think of themselves as libertarians care about, would align with what Ayn Rand is about.

Tal Tsfany (27:14):

Well, I would say she goes after the concept of altruism. By that, she means that the good is outside of you, that it's moral and good to do good for others at the expense of you, of sacrificing your values for somebody else's values. She says not that it's not just not noble, it's evil. If you try to understand what she's saying, this is why she called the book, The Virtue of Selfishness. She's trying to say something very, very deep. There is a confusion about altruism and egoism. If you look at it from a perspective of the moral obligation that you have as a human being is one, to be rational and to serve your hierarchy of values and trade with other people as a rational being.

Tal Tsfany (28:08):

If you sacrifice ... if you give me a hundred bucks and I give you back \$5, you have sacrificed the value for a lesser value. That's for her, immoral and people confuse that with charity. If I have a dollar in my pocket, and I see a beggar on the street and the fact that I want them to have a meal or something, is more valuable to me than the dollar that is the rational egoistic thing to give them the dollar. She says nothing about against charity and people confuse that about her. It's just a different moral perspective.

Bill Walton (28:50):

Well, there's a lot of, I don't know that evil's the right word, but a lot of damage done in the world, by people who think they're doing something for other people by helping them reorganize their lives and the view that the person who's doing good thinks is the right outcome. I think we see that in the left. I'd

argue our medical professionals in the middle of this pandemic, particularly, maybe Dr. Fauci or whatever, is thinking he's doing good for all of us based on his ideas, but we'd actually liked to self-organize and take care of it ourselves.

Tal Tsfany (29:30):

That's the essence of individualism. You can't tell me what my happiness is comprised of and the pursuit ... it's my own happiness. The left is wrong in many, many different ways. I think the left is very, very destructive because it's trying to equate individuals to be the same, or somebody knows for me, what my happiness should look like. So Ayn Rand is very black and white. She calls things evil. She's like this

Bill Walton (30:05):

Oh, I think that evil exists. It's real. We can't not look at that. It's real. Boy, this is something that's going to require a lot more than 30 minutes. When you and I first met about a week ago, it was just obvious that there were so many interesting things to dig into. We can't even get into most of what I wanted to talk to today. So we'll have to have you back. I understand John Alison, who is the very, very successful president or CEO of BB&T, is on your board.

Tal Tsfany (<u>30:40</u>):

He is. He is a dear friend. He is really a mentor to me. He's really helped-

Bill Walton (30:47):

Maybe when we get back up and out of the pandemic lockdown world, we can get you in here to the studio with John and we can talk about how his ideas played out in running BB&T. I think that'd be an interesting conversation. [crosstalk 00:31:02] We've got a couple of seconds here. Could you sort of tell us where to find the Ayn Rand Institute and how we can follow up and what you'd like our line of action to be as a consequence of this 30 minutes we spent together?

Tal Tsfany (31:17):

Yeah. So the first thing I always say to people is like, "How can I learn more? It's just read her books." Read The Fountainhead. Read the Atlas Shrugged. If it resonates with you, the characters and something about their sense of life, then you can move on to her nonfiction. And if you want to learn more about nonfiction, we have a world of resources all the way from our website aynrand.org. We came up with a new mobile app that has all of her talks. She gave talks from 1962 all the way to 1981, 19 talks in a row for the Ford Hall Forum and those are amazing. They're all in that app [crosstalk 00:31:56]

Bill Walton (<u>31:55</u>):

So these are in ari.org.

Tal Tsfany (<u>32:00</u>):

So it's aynrand.org and the app, if you look for the app, if you want to listen, it's called Ayn Rand University.

Bill Walton (32:07):

Well, I will hope everybody takes an opportunity to take a look at that. Tai, thanks for being here. I hope we'll have you back to dig into this further and thank you for joining me today on the Bill Walton show.

We've been talking with Tai Tsfany who is the CEO of The Ayn Rand Institute [inaudible 00:32:27] her many very interesting ideas. You can learn more about this on his page, on our website, the interesting people section where he'll be featured there.

Bill Walton (32:38):

Then also, I'd like you, if you're interested, to subscribe to this and you can learn more about our other shows on the website. Of course, you can always subscribe to us in all the major podcast platforms and YouTube. Also on the website, you can now give us feedback about the shows and maybe as importantly, give us some ideas, give me some ideas about guests and ideas you'd like to see us get into in the future. So anyway, thanks for joining and I'll see you again soon.

Speaker 2 (33:07):

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