

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 123: Rainn Wilson

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Tim Ferriss: Hello ladies and germs. This is Tim Ferris Show. I am sitting in the darkness on Long Island. I don't why all my lights are out, but it is very moody in here. And that's not really appropriate to the episode you're going to listen to, which is a very fun, very funny episode with Rainn Wilson, who is best known for playing Dwight on NBC's Emmy winning *The Office*. You can say hello to him on Twitter; please do @RainnWilson, R-A-I-N-N, W-I-L-S-O-N. He has also acted in *Super Cooties*, *Juno*, *Monsters versus Aliens*, *The Rocker*, and many other movies.

He co-founded SoulPancake. I didn't know this before doing my homework for this interview, and I love SoulPancake. It is a media company that seeks to tackle life's big questions. They put out some amazing videos, including some massive mega hits, like *Kid President*.

He's a board of member of Mode of Foundation, and cofounded Lee Day, an educational initiative in rural Haiti that we'll talk about in this episode a bit. He's also, last but not least, voice cracking like Doogie Howser, excuse me, the author of a brand new book: *The Bassoon King*, which is hilarious and very insightful. It is his laugh out loud memoir. We cover a lot in this episode. I won't go through everything because that would be ridiculous, but here are a few. The value of as if exercises from drama school.

His meditation practices. We talk and compare different methods. The origins of SoulPancake and some of their megahits, favorite books, documentaries, and movies, acting is therapy, even for non-actors, the sexy nostril exercise and much more. So thank you for listening as always. And without further ado, please enjoy my conversation with Rainn Wilson. Rainn, welcome to the show.

Rainn Wilson: Hey, Tim Ferris, good to be on your show.

Tim Ferriss: I have been looking forward to this, and it's just before Thanksgiving, which is I suppose appropriate. You've put out a lot of good work in the world, so thank you for that. I'll begin with that.

Rainn Wilson: I appreciate it.

Tim Ferriss: I observed sort of the cannon of work thus far. And you've spanned across multiple types of media. When you meet people and they ask you the question what do you do, how do you typically answer that?

Rainn Wilson: Well, it's a little easier for me than it is for someone like you. I mean, I do a lot of different things, but my first answer is I'm an actor because that's where I started, that's my greatest love, that's where I hope to be spending my dying breath. I'd love to be playing King Lear on the stage somewhere and keeling over when I'm 87 years old. So I'm an actor. I'm also an entrepreneur. I like to think of myself as a writer and a humanitarian as well, so throw those into the mix.

Tim Ferriss: Can you describe for people who aren't familiar with it, SoulPancake, because I love SoulPancake. And I have been a consumer, and I guess more recently a participant. I had an expert from an interview that I did, turned animation and put on SoulPancake, which was extremely humbling and flattering.

Rainn Wilson: Oh, that's right.

Tim Ferriss: But what it means to be wealthy, I guess, or defining that term. Could you tell people a bit about SoulPancake for those who aren't familiar?

Rainn Wilson: Sure. When I started getting well known for being Dwight on *The Office*, I saw an incredible opportunity to do something distinct, unique, and positive on the web. The web at that time when we were first having these conversations in 2008 was just the worst of humanity; just everything was just pop up ads and porn, and just crassness, and chat rooms. And nowadays it's actually, there's a lot more positive and there's interesting stuff on the web, but back then not so much.

I wanted a forum for people to be able to discuss what I call life's big questions. That's something that's always really intrigued me. What it means to be a human being, and all the questions around that. Those are scientific questions, they're philosophical questions, they're spiritual questions, they're questions of art and creativity. It's what it means to be alive. There was no place on the web to kind of discuss that stuff, so we started as kind of a blog, slash social networking site, where we had posts and people could write

in their own life's big questions, create member names and interact with each other, and it was really cool for awhile.

And then we started making some video content on the side. Just as a side thing I had done Oprah's podcast, and I started doing some stuff with the Oprah Winfrey Network, and making some little videos. We started a YouTube channel.

And all of a sudden we saw, wait a second, we're way better at making videos than we are at making web technology for interaction between people. So we kind of ditched the whole – in fact we did, we ditched our website. We pivoted completely and we became a media company. So SoulPancake is a media company. We put out digital content across multiple platforms, through the social networks, through YouTube. We do stuff on television. We do stuff for brands and advertising. And it's also changed a little bit in that now our mission is to produce inspiring content about stuff that matters, and that's what we're about.

Tim Ferriss: And when was it founded originally?

Rainn Wilson: 2009.

Tim Ferriss: 2009. And had did you decide on SoulPancake, or how did the team decide on SoulPancake as a name, and what were some of the names you decided against?

Rainn Wilson: One of the really difficult topics that we were gonna try to bring up at SoulPancake, which is the hardest topic in the world to bring up these days, and that is spirituality. We wanted something that dealt with – it's not a spirituality site, that's just one of the many things that we talk about, but if you're going to talk about the human experience, that's part of the human experience. We wanted something that had a little bit of a tip of the hat toward spirituality, so we literally were like on one of those sites, you know, GoDaddy, or one of those sites where you look up websites names.

We had food items written on the wall on little 3X5 cards, and then other catchy spiritual and philosophical minded phrases, so we had like Holly Taco and Spirit Burrito. We had all these crazy names we were tossing.

And funny story, I tell this in the book that I wrote. This was actually in Andy Grammer's apartment. Andy Grammer is a big pop star nowadays, back then he was a struggling street musician, so I like to think maybe we helped out by having this discussion in

his house. But then SoulPancake it wasn't taken, so we were like: hey, that's perfect. Everything was taken; it was crazy what was taken. Like, who registers the domain name Spirit Taco, you know; it's like come on.

Tim Ferriss: Right, somebody in Montenegro who is just sitting on that waiting for the big bid.

Rainn Wilson: Yeah, for his big payday.

Tim Ferriss: And a lot of people know of Kid President and that video and then the sequence of videos.

Rainn Wilson: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Did that originate on SoulPancake?

Rainn Wilson: Yeah, not exactly. We were having a discussion early on when we started our YouTube channel. And Devon Gundry, the cofounder of SoulPancake, was talking and he said, "You know, we really need more joy on our channel." Part of what we try and do at SoulPancake is we try and be of service. So we're a for profit company, but we're also trying to be of service to the world. It's kind of a crazy mission. It's an experiment; we're just seeing what happens. So we were looking for joy on the internet, that's a hard thing to find. Absolute joy, not like funny lol's with cats on pianos and stuff like that, but actual joy.

And Bobby Miller our channel manager said, "Hey, have you seen this kid, Kid President?" and he only had like two or three videos out at the time that only had like 5,000 views. And he was in Tennessee, a little African American kid in a suit, in a fake oval office made out of cardboard. And he and his brother-in-law Brad Montague, a brilliant film maker, had done these little videos and we're like: let's bring him over. So we just contacted him and said come over to the SoulPancake family.

And a few videos later when we had kind of get him a little bit more of a budget and some better writing, and some inspiration, they came up with Kid President's pep talk, which has like 50 million video views at this point.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, it's incredible. It's done incredibly well. And, I guess, across SoulPancake you have well over 200 million views at this point. That may be up to date, but that's the best number I could find. What would you like to see for its future?

Rainn Wilson: We want to be, SoulPancake wants to be kind of for lack of a better phrase, I know this is gonna make some people cringe. It drives me crazy, but I'm gonna say it. I'm gonna go there Tim Ferriss.

Tim Ferriss: Go for it.

Rainn Wilson: And that is we're gonna be – we want to be like the Oprah Winfrey for Millennials. We want to be the place that the brand that has carved out the niche of feel good, inspiring, uplifting, entertainment that digs into big issues for young people, so we want to own that space. And that's our goal as a media company.

Tim Ferriss: That's an admiral goal, I think. Switching gears just a little bit, of course you mentioned Dwight. You're very well known for playing Dwight on *The Office*, but you've picked a very wide range of different characters and projects. What has been the most challenging that comes to mind, and how did you prepare for it?

Rainn Wilson: Well, that's a great and deep question. So you're getting into the task and the craft of acting. A lot of acting is just like stand there and listen and respond and be yourself and it's not that hard. Sometimes acting is hard. There are certain roles that are super challenging.

I did a movie about four years ago called *Hesher* with Joseph Gordon Levitt and Natalie Portman, in which I played a dad. A dramatic role of a pill popping dad, who's wife had just dies a few months earlier, just kind of stuck in his grief. And that was really challenging because I had to bring – you had to really bring it. You can't fake it. You can't fake cry. You can't fake be sad. You've got to go to some really dark places in a movie like that to make it believable and make it pop.

That was a very hard month of doing that movie, and challenging. Yeah, so I hope – people didn't really see the film. You know, they don't really see a lot of independent films these days, but it's a really terrific film. Metallica does the music for it. And it's really kind of badass and sad and profound and funny at the same time.

Tim Ferriss: How do you explore a dark character like that, or a Backstrom for that matter? I mean, that's another, which I think people would not immediately envision in their mind as a role you would grab given the amount of comedy that you've done. But when you're trying to put yourself – develop that character and put yourself into a state

that facilitates the character, how do you go about doing that? And is it something that you can slip in and out of, or does that put you into a funk for the entire period that you're doing the shooting?

Rainn Wilson:

Well, there have been a few times when I have kind of just had myself kind of really enter the world view of the character. So the important thing when you're playing a character is you've got to see the world through their eyes. If you can really see the world through the character's eyes, then it doesn't matter what line you have, or what scenes you have, or what conversation you have, or situations, it will be truthful because you're really tapped into it.

So sometimes you – I'm not like all Mr. Method actors and like that, but there are certain roles where you have to do that. You have to go there for the duration of the film or when you're onset, or at least just around when you're shooting. My favorite analogue is there's this acting exercise you do in acting school called "as if". So you just pretend as if. Now my wife wasn't killed in a brutal accident and I wasn't addicted to pills, but I can imagine what that might be like.

So you activity as if your wife, my wife, who I love, I've been with for 20 years, I imagine what that would be like if I were to lose and her, and if I were to be on pills. I've certainly been on pills before. I've taken drugs before. I know what that's like. You know, I've experienced grief before. I've lost friends. So you kind of cultivate a kind of emotional imagination, there's an emotional landscape that you try and inhabit.

And you just go deeply into your imagination. It's just like pretending. I mean, it's basically kids in a sandbox, like you're a pirate and I'm a space alien, let's pretend, and ready go! You just do it on a much much deeper level. That's really all acting is about.

Tim Ferriss:

Part of the reason I ask is because I wonder when you hear people talk of say life intimidating art, art imitating life, if learning to go into a very deep dark, maybe depressive character in any way helps you get out of dark and depressive period in your own life? So maybe jumping to that side of things, are there any particular low periods in your life or career that you were able to dig your way out of, or build yourself back up out of that you think were illustrative or important and very pivotal in your life?

Rainn Wilson:

Well, that's a great question that I've never been asked before. I think that when I did *Backstrom*, I was going through a really hard

time in life. And it had nothing to do with *The Office* ending; it was just a hard time in life. That was both challenging and exhilarating to play a character like Everett Backstrom. For those of you – for those 12 of you who watched the show, thank you. And for the rest of you, fuck off. Can I say fuck off on your podcast?

Tim Ferriss: Oh, yeah.

Rainn Wilson: No, I'm just kidding.

Tim Ferriss: I throw out F bombs; they are fun.

Rainn Wilson: He's a very dark human being. He sees the worst in everybody, and he sees only kind of the corrosive in reality. So it was challenging and helpful at the same time to be in his worldview, especially when I was shooting the pilot.

It was very hard to go there when my life was having a difficult time, but at the same time I kind of found it exhilarating. I wish I could answer it better than that, but it's both.

Tim Ferriss: What was difficult – if you're open to talking about it – what was difficult about your life at the time?

Rainn Wilson: I was just going through some family stuff, and marital stuff, and personal stuff that was just really difficult. And then I was flying up to Vancouver shooting Backstrom and it was just a hard time. It was just a really challenging time.

Tim Ferriss: On multiple levels. What do you do when you feel overwhelmed, what do you do to improve the situation?

Rainn Wilson: Well, you know, I have spiritual faith that I rely on, that I use. So I use prayer and meditation as tools to center me and bring me back kind of into reality. I also find that for me, like acting is a wonderful escape because you get out of your own head, and you get to go into someone else's head. And, you know, it was like that on *The Office* too, and doing comedy. You know, life was good and life was bad.

There was something wonderful about coming to Dwight, and I could just put Rainn Wilson aside and just all of that bullshit and clear it out of my head and out of my heart and just be Dwight Schrute. And sometimes it was just super super fun to do that. So

those are some of the tools. Acting is a tool. Prayer and meditation is a tool I use to kind of bring myself into the world.

Tim Ferriss: And your faith, I know I'm going to massacre this because I've only read it and not heard it said, but is it Baha'i; is that correct?

Rainn Wilson: Yeah, Baha'i.

Tim Ferriss: Baha'i. There we go, thank you.

Rainn Wilson: Like, Baha'i, how you doing? Yeah, like that.

Tim Ferriss: And now I want to come back to that, but what does your – when you meditate, what does that look like, and do you do it on a daily basis, what's the format of that?

Rainn Wilson: I try and meditate every day. There's no format in the Baha'i faith, it's just greatly encouraged to meditate. When you pray, you're communing with the creator. You're communing with the universe. You're putting stuff out there. And when you're meditating, you're listening to the universe. But it's really pretty simple. I get a great deal of benefit if I even do a ten minute meditation.

And out of that ten minutes, if four of the minutes my mind can be very still and very silent. There are great guided meditations, now there are apps. There are all kinds of things you can do for meditation. But for me it's just about, I won't say silencing the mind because that's impossible.

In the mind thoughts are always gonna pop up, but those thoughts pop up, you just notice them. You identify them. You let them float in front of your eyes almost like, you know, one of those old fashioned Wall Street ticker machines. And you find – I find a tremendous amount of peace, serenity, and bliss, in just being in consciousness. And consciousness is not thought. Consciousness is just being.

I am this being. I am not separate from the giant being of earth and the cosmos and the universe, and just being in that stillness is incredibly rewarding. I get really a ton of clarity, and I get a ton of energy from it. And these have been proven in scientific studies, by the way, in all kinds of things, from healing trauma, to giving you more energy, to giving you more focus in your work, meditation is a pretty incredible tool.

Tim Ferriss: And lower of cortisol. I've been spending time interacting with some researchers at Johns Hopkins, a gentleman named Roland Griffiths, and also a gent name Adam Gazzaley; he runs a neuroimaging lab at UCSF. And what's been very interesting, and we don't have to go down the rabbit hole with this, but it appears that when you – if you look at experienced meditators and brain activity, and I'm blanking on the particular area.

I think it might be somewhere in the parietal lobe, but I could be off. In any case there's a portion of the brain that is thought to contribute to the separation of self and other. So it's associated with let's just call it the ego, and that is inhibited both in the use of say Silibin, which was found in magic mushrooms, but also you experience a similar type of pattern in experienced meditators, which is kind of cool.

Rainn Wilson: Well, I know that they – oh, sorry go ahead.

Tim Ferriss: No, no, go ahead.

Rainn Wilson: I heard a fascinating thing on the radio once where they did a study and they found the happiest man in the world, so they did a brain scan. And they found the happiest person they could possibly find. And this guy was, I think he was an American, he was living in Wisconsin, but he was a student of Tibetan Buddhism. And at the time when they did the brain scan, which charted out as the very happiest, he was in the process of meditating. And it was a meditation of kind of universal compassion.

And so it's a meditation where you're feeling at one with everyone, and great compassion for everyone on planet earth, and all being son planet earth, human, animal, plant, what they're going through. And in so doing that achieved like the greatest happiness. That kind of goes along with what you're saying.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. And there is sort of like even if you are self interested, there's a biological benefit to empathy and compassion in meditation. And just to reiterate something you said because I think it's so important, is that I try to mediate 20 minutes each morning. And like you mentioned there are apps, like Calm and Headspace that are very helpful for this.

But even if I'm violently getting punched in the psyche by like my to-do list and worries and anxieties and thoughts for 15 or even 18 minutes out of 20, if I have two minutes where the mud kind of

settles and the mind is clear, it has an incredible impact on the entire day for me.

Rainn Wilson: I feel exactly the same way. That's exactly my experience. Even out of a ten minute meditation, if I can just get two or three minutes in there where I have almost achieved thoughtlessness, and just kind of a serene bliss, it's like taking a power nap, and it helped you through your whole day.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. And I had, I think, it was Tara Brach who said this to me, but it might have been someone else, but they said if you just come back to your breath or mantra, whatever it is that you're focusing on if you're doing concentrated meditation, it's the coming back that is the practice. So if you're just distracted, and you're basically just bouncing off the walls mentally with your monkey mind for those 19 minutes, if you come back even once, you can consider it a successful succession. I think for type A personalities that's really important to keep in mind.

Rainn Wilson: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: You mentioned something I'd love to explore a little bit, which is that acting can be a wonderful escape, and I'm paraphrasing here, but from your own head. I was actually watching *Amy* yesterday, which is a documentary about Amy Winehouse. A very sad story, tragic on many levels, but she produced some beautiful music from bad experiences. She was able to escape her own head by putting these poems, which became songs on paper.

Are there any particular exercises from, whether it's acting school, or improv, or otherwise that you think could benefit non actors, who just want to help create new avenues of thinking or embrace some type of therapeutic effect of getting outside of their own head?

Rainn Wilson: Yeah. Specific ones, I suppose I could go into, but I studied with a great teacher at NYU named Paul Walker. He died of AIDS, but he was an exquisite teacher, and he taught theatre games. And for me that was a real revelation because when I had tried acting early on, I was very stiff and very in my head and cerebral, and kind of stuck, and kind of like, it was a very conscious, like how am I gonna say this line, and how do I best look when I'm turning this way.

It was just a very self-conscious style of acting that was bad. It was sucky. So what Paul got us doing in acting school at NYU was just

playing. And there's something incredibly freeing about playing like a kid. And that your impulses as an actor and your impulses as a kid at play are really the same thing. Like I said before, it's deeply pretending. Are there specific exercises? Man, I suppose I could think of some, but how much fun is it to play red light, green light for 20 minutes, or duck duck goose.

And then to move from those exercises into more and more imaginative kind of improvisations, but where you allow yourself to just play like a child. And sometimes children play and they're competitive, sometimes they play and they're very serious, it's not all kind of this general like “wee” kind of stuff.

And I found that so freeing. And it was the key for me as an actor that kind of broke me open and got me out of my head, and just got me in my body, and in that place of kind of pure imagination and spontaneity that you really want as an actor.

Tim Ferriss: And I think it seems to me also when you put yourself in that place, much like meditation, you have to be present state aware. You can't be worrying about something that you have scheduled two weeks in the future.

Rainn Wilson: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Or resenting something like some idiot who cut you off in traffic that morning. You have to be in that moment and be effective, and to have fun. You just can't be distracted by those things.

Rainn Wilson: Yeah, like we'll do a thing where you – I just remembered because I did this recently at SoulPancake. I did some sessions with the employees at SoulPancake. I do kind of games and improv stuff, where everyone has a number from one to ten. There's two teams often on each side of the room.

There's a stool in the center of the room with a shoe on it. The goal is you got to get the shoe and then get back to your place in line, right? It's a pretty simple game. But then you also do this game called Sexy Nostril. You write down adjectives and you write down body parts. So it could be angry, sad, lonely, energetic, those are the adjectives. And then body parts, you know, earlobe, testicle, anus, shoulder blade, finger nail, whatever. And you draw one of each. And then you try and play a game manifesting those characteristics.

So if you have sexy nostril, and then you have to play that same game of getting the shoe and getting back in the line, but you're a person, where the center of their energy is in their nostril and it's a very sensual sexual energy. And you're just kind of – it helps you create a character and play as that character. And it takes you out of your head, and it just gets you in your body and gets you, kind of feeling and responding.

I love teaching that stuff. It's super fun. And for me Tim, I'm in my head a lot, and it kind of sucks.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, me too.

Rainn Wilson: So there's certain tools that I have to use to get by. I've learned in my life, I don't remember every day, but there's certain thing is have to do to just be out of my head and just to get to normal. I'm not talking about like being really super effective. Just to get to normal I have to do meditation. I have to do some exercise. If I can get into nature, great, if I can play some tennis, better, and acting is that same way. Acting, rehearsing, playing characters, these are the things that get me out of my head and out of just analyzing every God damn thing that comes down the pike and leaves me miserable and making really bad choices.

Tim Ferriss: I'm laughing because I spend so much time in my own head. And when people are like: are you gonna write another book?

I'm like: well, actually, I can't contend with another three years in my own head right now, so no. I'm gonna be putting that off.

Rainn Wilson: Nice.

Tim Ferriss: I want to talk about your book. Before we get to that, you mentioned exercise, you also mentioned tennis, aren't any particular types of exercise, or how do you exercise, what is your routine, your ideal exercise routine?

Rainn Wilson: I'm the worst. First of all I'm a big fat slob. I don't have the Four Hour Workweek and the Four Hour Body down, and the Four Hour this. I can do four hours of videogames; the four hour videogame diet. I jog, which I love doing because it also clears my head. And there's something physiologically, which I'm sure you know about, about walking and jogging that it actually is really healing to the brain because when you do it, the energy goes back and forth between both lobes of the brain.

When I was reading about that I was wondering, like why is it when I go jogging I feel so refreshed? And it's not just the exercise; it's also that physiological component. I play tennis about twice a week. I'd love to play more like three or four times a week. When I play tennis, it's all your focus on the ball, and the focus on your movement, and these kind of spiral movements that you're making, and that really gets you out of your head good. And then recently, just literally in the last year or two I've been doing some weight training, which I find I just feel really good doing it.

But everything I do is super light and really undisciplined, so there's not going to be a Rainn Wilson diet and exercise book coming out anytime soon. I feel bad even talking about it because you're like the master, you're like the Zen master of all things exercise.

Tim Ferriss: Well, the good news is it's very very minimalist. We can definitely talk about that another time, any time. The next few questions I'd like to ask, and I have a feeling that Baha'i is definitely going to come back into this, but to fire off a couple of very short questions, and the answers don't need to be short, but they can be. When you think of the word successful, who is the first person that comes to mind and why?

Rainn Wilson: Successful. Oh, man, you're killing me. Wow, I don't have anyone coming to mind. Is that weird?

Rainn Wilson: It's not weird. We can try another adjective. When you think of the word admirable, who is the first person who comes to mind and why?

Rainn Wilson: You know, when I think of admirable, I do a lot of work in Haiti. And there's a lot of people there that I've met over the years that have given up big careers, they've given up a lot of money and a lot of potential in the United States to go live and work in Haiti. And just to be of service to people that don't have much. And to me that's really admirable. There is a woman I'm thinking of that taught school her whole life in Haiti, and then retired, and had a little bit of retirement money.

And then she – her name was Sue Puzo – she retired and went to her house. And the next morning there was a ring of her doorbell, and there was a little Haitian boy. And he said, “Hey, I heard you used to teach.” She said yeah. And he's like, “Well, I need to learn how to read, will you teach me how to read?” And she's like, “Okay, come in. Let me give you a little lesson.”

And she gave him a few little exercises and some sheets to work on. And then the next morning he knocks on the door and there's three little boys there. And he's like, "I brought two of my friends. We all want to learn how to read." And she's like, "Okay, come in." and then the next day there were more, and the next day there were more. All of a sudden this retired school teacher, who is in her 70's, has created a school in her backyard. And I'm not exaggerating. It's all in her backyard of her house. And there are classrooms.

There's a tool shed that has first grade. And a palm frond has kindergarten under it. And the third graders are on her deck, and in her kitchen are the fourth graders. And she's hired teachers, and she's used her retirement money and what little inheritance she had to hire teachers and start a little school. And then she even rented the house next door to house these homeless street kids. And I got to see this firsthand many times on many trips down to Haiti, and watch the evolution of this school. Eventually, she and her husband just got too sick and too old to continue it, and they had to transition the kids into other places.

But when I think of admirable, like really admirable, you know, I know a lot of billionaires. I know a lot of actual like billionaires. And people with a lot of money. I know people; I know movie stars and people that are very successful in the entertainment industry. Nothing against them, and a lot of them are really admirable successful people, but when I think about, like what really moves me in my heart about, what is admirable, it's selfless giving to someone else to me is truly admirable.

Tim Ferriss: Sue Puzo. And you have an educational initiative, as I understand it? And I'm gonna probably miss pronounce this one too, is it Ali Day?

Rainn Wilson: Ali Day.

Tim Ferriss: I was so close, but so far. Can you describe what the Ali Day is doing in Haiti?

Rainn Wilson: Yeah. Well, my wife and I went down to Haiti to tour some schools before the earthquake, just a few months before the earthquake, so it was like six, six and a half years ago now. And we fell in love with that country. And I really encourage you and all your listeners to go down to Haiti and give it a tour and check it out because you fall in love with the country. It's a beautiful

country. As ravaged as it is, as poor as it is, as desperate as it is, there's something magical about it. It's really the culture, the art, the music, the people, the sense of humor, the food, the life is really infectious.

People really fall in love with it. So we fell in love with it and then the earthquake happened. So we started going down and doing this trauma work with adolescent girls after the earthquake, where we'd use the arts to kind of heal trauma.

And then we saw all these incredible effects of using the arts with adolescent girls, and education for adolescent girls, and literacy for adolescent girls. And then the more I was reading about it – you know, I read a lot about – and the United Nations recently had a study, and you're going to hear more and more about this, that the number one way to eradicate poverty in the world is to educate girls.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, totally.

Rainn Wilson: Girl's education is the number one way.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, because if you educate a girl, you're ultimately educating a family. And I hate to say for the male gender, but there's a lot of like playing craps and drinking and so on that goes on.

Rainn Wilson: I always say if you educate a girl, she educates her children and her cousins, her aunts, her mom, her sisters and her neighbors. If you educate a boy, they move to the big city and become an uber driver, or the equivalent, that's what always happens. So we got into this art's education and girl's education, so we're out in rural Haiti.

We're way out in the north of Haiti. We go to some really far out places that most Haitians don't even know exists. We do arts and self empowerment, self esteem workshops, and literacy, and then we give scholarships and try and get the girls into the educational system.

Tim Ferriss: And I will link to you that organization in the show notes along with everything else for people who want to learn more about it. going a little micro, I guess, besides *The Bassoon King*, what is the book you've given most to other people as a gift?

Rainn Wilson: The book I've given the most as a gift is called *The Family Virtues Guide*, by – I think it's Linda Popov is the last name: P-O-P-O-V.

The Family Virtues Guide is a really interesting thing I give to parents. It basically talks about virtues based education.

And it's for all kids. You can be Atheist, you can be Catholic, Muslim, you can have faith, you can be Agnostic, whatever. One of the recent developments too in education has been around, you can call it whatever you like. I like calling it virtues, but you can call it character traits, or positive character leadership traits, whatever, but teaching a kid the stuff they don't learn in school about virtues. For instance, what are virtues?

Compassion, honesty, kindness, humility, perseverance, determination, all of these are positive virtues. You can look at them from a religious standpoint. You can look at them just from an entrepreneurial standpoint. But kids really thrive when they learn these virtues. And the world is really hurting because the kids don't have them nowadays.

They don't learn them in school, and a lot of times they don't learn them from their parents. So *The Family Virtues Guide* gives all these exercises. We have like a virtue of the week. Like, we'll have determination as a virtue of the week. And then every day we'll check in like: hey, how was your determination today. And my son Walter, who is 11, like he'll go like, "Well, I was really having a hard time, but then I got really determined and I pushed through and I finished test, and I feel really good about myself."

So creating a consciousness ant these character traits is really important. It's a great tool for teachers. There's also a teacher's guide by the same author. I just think it's a gold mine.

Tim Ferriss:

I'm so glad you brought that up. It's very Ben Franklin. I've been looking for a book like this. And not because I have children, but because I've always wondered why aren't these traits or characteristics or virtues very similar to sort of arete in ancient Greece, why aren't they taught in a progressive way with exercises?

Because you could, ostensibly, put something like that together; a curriculum where you have sort of comfort, challenges, and exercises that develop each of these, or test each of these.

Rainn Wilson:

I feel like *The Family Virtues Guide* is just the beginning. I think you could go way farther than it goes. And I think you are right, there could be an entire curriculum based around this stuff. What is incredible is when you bring your consciousness to it. Like, what

happens when you bring your consciousness to compassion? And you have a child, an 8-year-old or even a teenager, noticing compassion around them. And then noticing when they're compassionate to someone else. Compassion can be trained like any other muscle.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, definitely. I think there's also a neurological basis for that, there would have to be that I would think if you're digging the groove and sort of the mental record player for compassion, it's going to become more and more of a reflective action or thought pattern at the very least.

Do you have any favorite documentaries or films?

Rainn Wilson: I have tons of favorite documentaries. Boy, you really stump people with the questions because they're so – God damn you.

Tim Ferriss: They're highly specific. We can come back to this one, too.

Rainn Wilson: Okay, let's come back to that. Let me mull that.

Tim Ferriss: Okay. So we'll come back to the documentaries. Another highly specific one, what purchase – it doesn't have to be a purchase, it could be something free – but what purchase of \$100.00 or less has most positively impacted your life in recent memory?

Rainn Wilson: Okay, it's not \$100.00 or less, but I have to talk about it.

Tim Ferriss: Let's do it.

Rainn Wilson: Okay. So I was snoring and I was driving my wife crazy. And I was kind of snoring more and more as I was getting gin through my 40s. and so I went in and I got this mouth guard from my dentist, that not only stops me from grinding my teeth, but it kind of moves my jaw forward, like just by half an inch or something like that when I sleep, so it clears like this air channel. And like all of a sudden I'm breathing better all night long and not snoring, and I'm getting like a way better night's sleep, and it's completely transformed my life.

And it's so funny that it's just this little plastic mold, you know, you put your teeth in the mold. And I wear that in my sleep and it's just literally changed my life. A piece of plastic in my mouth has changed my life.

Tim Ferriss: I love it. And that's something people can experiment with also, if they don't want to go to the dentist. I mean, as someone who has worn way too many mouth guards because I had a habit of enjoying getting punched in the head or kicked in the face doing combat sports, which I don't recommended for anyone who wants to preserve cognitive function

Yeah, you can just get something at a sporting goods' store. And I guess the plus is if you're sleeping and you have a home intruder, you also have sort of home game advantage.

Rainn Wilson: Nice.

Tim Ferriss: What is something that you –

Rainn Wilson: Can I kick you in the face or the head or hit you with something, can I just do that?

Tim Ferriss: I'll tell you what; I'll start doing neck exercises. You can start working on your hamstring flexibility, and then I'm happy to let you give it a go.

Rainn Wilson: Alright. Boom, we're on. Oh, this is gonna be good.

Tim Ferriss: We can put it on SoulPancake. That could be very inspiring.

Rainn Wilson: Rainn Wilson kicks Tim Ferriss in the face. It just needs to be a 15 second video that will go viral.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, it can be used on Vine. It's very multipurpose. What is something that you believe that other people think is insane, if anything? I've got plenty for myself, but I'm curious if anything comes to you?

Rainn Wilson: I have so many things that I believe that people think are just insane. I believe that world peace is possible. I really do.

I believe that some things are gonna have to change, where it's not even close to being there yet. But I do believe that humanity can put its worse nature aside and find a way to come together. And we see aspects of this more and more. I mean, look at the way the western states are acting and interacting. And the tragedy in France and the way – especially the Western world – rallied around France. You know, there are a couple of folks out there, there are a couple of countries that have some big issues and some big problems, but I truly believe that humanity can do this.

We can come together on world peace. We can reduce our armaments to what we need to defend ourselves, and we can just work on making a better world. I think that we can get there. I think that it's really easy to just be negative and be like, "Well, that's bullshit. We'll never get there, not with people the way they are."

Like, that's such an easy fallback position. So I guess that's something else that I believe is that cynicism is a disease that robs people of the gift of life. And it's just that it's easy. It's way easier to be negative, sarcastic, and cynical. It's an easy fallback position. And it's much harder to be hopeful and positive and proactive.

Tim Ferriss: I completely agree. And I think also that by being against passive armchair cynicism, it doesn't mean you're against constructive skepticism, if that makes sense?

Rainn Wilson: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: A lot of people feel like: oh, you're saying I can't be critical. It's like no, I want you to be critical, but I want you to be critical in a constructive way, where you're actually making mistakes of ambition, as opposed to mistakes of sloth.

Rainn Wilson: What's your intention in being critical? Is your intention in being critical to make the world a better place, or to bring enlightenment, then great, but if your intention in being critical is to bring people down and hold people back, like: oh, that will never work, then that's just bullshit.

Tim Ferriss: I agree. One of the more interesting discussions about world peace that I've seen was actually an experimental class at Stanford with BJ Fogg. It was part of the persuasive technology lab. And I think it was peace innovations is what they called it. But what they realized very quickly, they had a class that was full of many people from; of course different genders, different cultures, different religions, and they had a lot of trouble agreeing upon what world peace would look like as a single concept.

And what BJ did, which I thought was very smart, he said, "Okay, if we're having trouble agreeing on what world peace exactly would look like, let's agree on some of the antecedents, like what are the components that at least have to be part of something that looks like world peace." And so they started creating these sub

categories, and smaller addressable components of world peace. So at the very least thinking about that problem –

Rainn Wilson: That's pretty smart.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, it would improve things. And you might not get to perfection, but you can at least improve and get to the better. Are there any common misconceptions about you?

Rainn Wilson: I think the most common misconception of me is that I'm like Dwight. People know me as Dwight, and they see me in the airport and they're like, "Dwight, it's Dwight. Hey, Dwight!" Which is a really weird question also when people say, "Hey, are you Dwight?" It's like, well, um, I play Dwight. But I can't say I play Dwight because then I sound like a douchebag.

Because then I'm like, "Well, no, I actually play Dwight." It's actually a very Dwightish thing to say. But it's a weird thing to say yes, I am Dwight because I'm not Dwight; I'm Rainn. It was one of like 100 different characters that I've played in my life is Dwight, so that's kind of weird. I think that's a misconception.

Tim Ferriss: What do you as Rainn, what do you have most in common with Dwight, and what is completely different about the two of you?

Rainn Wilson: I guess what I have most in common are principles. I don't always hold up to them, by the way, but I kind of have high principles about what I should do, what people should do, what's right. and what do I have least in common with him is, I think, he's just much more regimented and authoritative, thinks in boxes and straight lines, so I don't work that way. I'm quit eth opposite.

Tim Ferriss: And why did you decide to write a book?

Rainn Wilson: I had a story to tell. I knew that I had a lot of funny anecdotes. You know, most of the stories are comedy; most of the book is I just tried to make it funny, and I think it is very funny. It's my own peculiar look at the world, but I also had a story to tell. And that story was, you know, when I took a look back on my life, when I founded SoulPancake, and actually this happened when I wrote the introduction of the SoulPancake book that came out about five years ago. I realized that this spiritual journey that I've been on, which is part of my journey as a Baha'i, a member of the Baha'i faith, is it's really interesting to me.

It may not be interesting to anyone else, to me it's very interesting, growing up in faith, losing faith and becoming an atheist, and having nothing to do with God or faith or devotion or religion or anything like that, and then slowly very slowly, over a decade of search, going on a spiritual search to find myself, to find God, my place in the universe.

And to me that's a really interesting through line that runs through the book. So it's 80, 90 percent comedy, but it has a little bit of this kind of spiritual quest in it. And I think that we're all on that spiritual quest. We're all like Quai Chang Cane wondering around the old west, you know, looking for our identities and for meaning in the world. And that's okay; meaning it doesn't have to be accomplishment in the traditional western sense through accruing crap, meaning it can come in a lot of other ways. So it helped me find a lot of meaning and that's why I wrote the book.

Tim Ferriss: So you had the SoulPancake book, *Chew on Life's Big Questions*, and now *The Bassoon King: My life in art faith and idiocy*. What did you learn in the process of making the first book that helped you with the second book?

Rainn Wilson: Well, that was the answer – what I learned in writing the introduction to the SoulPancake book was that there's a much larger story to tell here. What I learned in writing *The Bassoon King* is – and I highly suggest everyone writing a memoir at some point in time. Tim, maybe that's your next book, maybe it's just a story of your life because people just love stories of people's lives, and their struggles and their ups and downs, and their positive things. But what I learned is like how many of my greatest failures and tests have really made me who I am today.

Like, I'll give you a quick example. I was cast in a Broadway show when I was about 29 or 30 years old. My first Broadway show and I sucked. I bombed. I have a chapter called, "I Bombed on Broadway." Again, I was very in my head. I was very stuck and cerebral and stiff. And I couldn't get out of it, and I tried and I tried, but I just was terrible at the part.

But after I finished that show, I was kind of like: you know what, fuck it. I'm never doing that again. I'm never gonna get stuck in that again. I can't. Life is too short. I'm too miserable and I got to be me as an actor. I have to bring who I really am as a human to my acting. So it's quirky and I'm offbeat and I'm odd. I'm a weirdo. I buy shirts at the thrift store and this is who I am and this is who I have to be. It really changed me as an actor and as an artist. I went

through hell in that Broadway show, but if I hadn't gone through that hell, I never would have been able to play Dwight Shrute.

I never would have had the success that I had in LA and on TV and film in doing odd characters if I hadn't gone through that terrible, terrible ordeal. So that was an incredible thing to learn from writing a book, looking back at those failures and how they can be transformative.

Tim Ferriss: I think if I ever write a memoir, I'll have to do it soon and it will be called *14 Minutes Into My 15 Minutes: a short biography of Tim* – a short memoir of Tim Ferriss before it's irrelevant. What are the core tenants of the Baha'i faith? Correct me if I'm wrong, but your parents, or at least one of your parents were also Baha'i, is that right?

Rainn Wilson: Yeah. I grew up Baha'i, so the tenants of the Baha'i faith are – Baha'is believe that there is only one God. And that this creator all loving, all knowing creator wants to educate humanity by sending down divine teachers every 500 or 1,000 years. These divine teachers, you know a lot of their names, like the Buddha, Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammad.

They come to various people at various points of time, kind of giving an updated lesson in spiritual evolution from God the creator because God wants us to mature spiritually, just like we're maturing technologically and materially. And we're not there yet. So Baha'is believe that a man named Powal La, and that name means the glory of the God. That Powal La was an actual person, who lived in Iran in the mid 1800's. he proclaimed himself to be the promised one of God, the newest, the latest of these divine teachers.

He was in a Muslim country, so he was persecuted and locked up in prison and tortured and banished, and his family was killed. And tens of thousands early Baha'is were martyred. And he spent his whole life being banished and in prison, and he wrote many hundreds of books and tablets that Baha'is believe are holy and that contain the solution for the world's problems today.

So Baha'is are hard at work at kind of healing the world spiritually, theoretically that's what we're doing.

Tim Ferriss: And do you have any type of, or equivalent, or approximation to say the Ten Commandments for instance? Because I find that if

you look at say the Ten Commandments, I mean, a lot of them seem like pretty good rules.

Rainn Wilson: Sure.

Tim Ferriss: Good guidelines even if you are atheist or otherwise. Is there a similar sort of to do and no tot do list in the Baha'i faith?

Rainn Wilson: Yeah, there are basic core tenants of the Baha'i faith. So one is the harmony of the human race, so elimination of racial prejudice is super important for Baha'is, we're all members of one human family. no one is better or worse from their skin color. All religions are one.

I think you'll dig this one: the essentially harmony of science and religion, we live in a world where science and religion are so at odds and they can't see eye to eye. The secular science folks are like, religion is bullshit. And the born again fundamentalist religion people are like, scientists are full of shit. Baha'is believe they're both manifestations of the creation of God; that science is there for us to understand the physical world that we're in. it's very real. Religion without science is mere superstition, according to Baha'i law.

One of the important teachings of the Baha'i faith is individual investigation of truth. So every person is on a journey to find the truth for themselves, and that's an important obligation for everyone to undertake; finding the truth for themselves. The equality of men and women, this was taught by Bahauallah in the mid 1800s, and men and women are equal and universal education.

Another teaching is the eventual universal language. That if we have a universal language that runs throughout the world, that will be – you talk about those building blocks to world peace, a universal language that is spoken by everyone on the planet, in addition to whatever their native language was, would be super helpful so that everyone could communicate with one another. It sounds kind of simplistic but it actually would be super, super helpful.

We seem to be heading that way kind of with English right now; it's kind of becoming a universal language. You go to Europe, you go to China, you go to Russia and everyone speaks English as a second language. So those are some of the key teachings. There's no clergy in the Baha'i faith, which I really like. There's no one

above anyone in the Baha'i faith; no one has a station above anyone else. So that's a cool thing.

Tim Ferriss:

When you pray, what does praying look like? Do you have any favorite or common prayers? And the reason I ask is again, even for someone who is non religious, I think there are things that can be very useful, even if they're just philosophies. For instance, the serenity prayer is very similar to the meditations of a lot of stoic philosophers, and I read a lot of stoic philosophy and I find the serenity a very, very helpful thing to memorize and to consider on a regular occasion. Do you have any particular prayers that you have found helpful over the years, or most recently?

Rainn Wilson:

I love the serenity prayer. It's really beautiful. I love especially the second half of the serenity prayer, which doesn't get as much focus. You're essentially saying: God, grant me the courage to do the things I can.

And that's an interesting way of looking at the world where we live in a very self will powered world. It's like pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, and you are what you make yourself. It's interesting if you believe that there is a creative force, an all loving, all seeing creative force that runs throughout the universe. That force can be tapped into. You can turn to it and you can ask for help. You can ask for courage.

You can ask for serenity. I think to me, the most important prayers and the ones that really help balance me out, like we talked earlier on in the conversation, are prayers of gratitude. If I can be in gratitude every day, if I can turn to the divine presence around me and just say thank you for my health, thank you for the beautiful sunlight, thank you for enough food in my refrigerator, thank you for keeping my son happy and healthy; it shifts my day.

And it shifts my whole perspective. Because I can easily get, like, shit, how come I'm not a movie star, and how come I'm not getting the work I want to get, and how come my book is not a No. 1 bestseller? It's easy to get into that negativity but prayers of gratitude, I find really helpful.

Tim Ferriss:

Coming back to getting out of your own head, I think that it ties into compassion and empathy and looking at the world through a lens other than your own at the same time. I find as someone who is hardwired to be kind of Type A, hard driving, achievement focused, focusing and driving hard on something is not the difficult part. It's stepping outside of that torrent of self focused thought to

exhibit gratitude and actual appreciation that's challenging, and that's the piece that requires more practice.

We're going to wrap up in just a few minutes but I will come back to the documentary question; I've not forgotten. In the meantime, if you could have one billboard anywhere with anything on it, what would it say?

Rainn Wilson: Maybe it would be a billboard that says "Don't be an asshole." Because that would make the world a lot better place. Maybe someone driving along would be like, "Oh, you know what? Maybe I'm just gonna be not as much of an asshole today. I'm not gonna cut people off on the road and ignore my kids, backstab someone at work." How about that? Don't be an asshole.

Tim Ferriss: Is there any particular place you'd put that?

Rainn Wilson: Anywhere in Los Angeles; anywhere.

Tim Ferriss: What advice would you give to your 30-year-old self, and if you could just place us in time or in place; where were you, what were you doing at 30 and what advice would you give yourself?

Rainn Wilson: At 30 I was a starving New York theater actor, just going around trying to get acting work. And barely making 17 grand a year doing theater. I did a bunch of side jobs. I was a man with a van; I had a moving company. I think what I would talk to myself about is you have to believe in your capacity. You have to believe that your capacity is greater than you could probably imagine what it is. To me, this is a kind of divine question. God has given us talents and faculties and it's up to us to discover them and expand them to their maximum, and use them for maximum service in the world.

I had a lot more capacity at 30 than I thought. I thought of myself as like, well, you know, I could get some acting work and maybe I could do an occasional guest spot on *Law and Order* and make enough money to just get by as an actor so I don't have to drive this damn moving van. That was like the extent of where my imagination was for myself. So I would just say believe in yourself deeper. You're bigger than that. Dream bigger, I would say.

Tim Ferriss: That could be your second billboard. After "Don't be an Asshole," you sort of prime the pump with that and then a mile later on Sunset, you have "Dream Bigger." Just so their dreams aren't of being a bigger asshole. Favorite documentaries or films? Anything?

Rainn Wilson: Oh man, there are so many, dude. Every documentary, I've seen thousands of them. My favorite...

Tim Ferriss: Just one that you love. Just one you recommend.

Rainn Wilson: *The Act of Killing*, did you see that one?

Tim Ferriss: Oh, so good and so brutal. Oh, my God.

Rainn Wilson: Yeah. Nothing goes to the heart of the human condition and the violence of human beings like that documentary. It's set in Indonesia and they go to all of these men that killed thousands or tens of thousands of people in a rebellion in Indonesia and asked them to reenact how they killed people and make it into an action movie. They actually try and make sections into an action movie, just to see what happens as this kind of grand social experiment.

It really goes into the dark side, the shadow side of the human condition in a way that is heart stopping. I really like dark stuff a lot. I would say my favorite movie of all time is *Apocalypse Now*. And every time I've seen *Apocalypse Now*, I see the world a little bit differently. Again, I think you learn a lot about the positive side of the world by kind of studying the dark side.

Again, it goes into the very worst of humanity and in war. And in so doing, I always find it really inspiring. I come out of watching *Apocalypse Now* uplifted. I don't know. Maybe that's just me.

Tim Ferriss: No, it's not just you. I had the most decorated special operations commander during the entire Iraq conflict, Navy Seal Commander Jocko Willink on the podcast. And he said effectively the exact, same thing. So it's fascinating to see how it can span from military to entertainment. But when you're thinking about the human condition, you do need to consider the entire picture and not be like the blind men touching the elephant; what is an elephant? One's touching the trunk, one's touching the tail, one's touching the foot.

You really have to take in the macro picture if you want to have a positive impact, and understand what you're trying to navigate, I think, in some capacity.

Rainn Wilson: Nice.

Tim Ferriss: Do you have any ask or request for my audience? This is effectively the last question and then we'll get into where people can find out more about you, and so on. But do you have any asks or requests for the people listening?

Rainn Wilson: Buy my book. Buy my fucking book. Is that possible to say?

Tim Ferriss: That's totally fair. I'll ask for a second request or ask. And the book, by the way folks, *The Bassoon King* is hilarious. A lot of laugh out loud moments. It's a fast, easy read and very, very honest. So if this has whetted your appetite, then you should check it out. And I'll link to that in the shown notes as well, for people. Any other ask or request?

Rainn Wilson: I would ask people, I would ask listeners – I don't want to sound like a pretentious asshole but I would ask people to dig deeper. We can make the world a better place.

We can ask more of ourselves. We can do more for others. And I think that our life is a journey, and to dig deep on your journey and the world will benefit from it.

Tim Ferriss: I love it. You said this already but the advice to your 30-year-old self; I think anybody could take it. Believing that you have more capacity than you might think, and dreaming bigger. That's been so incredibly useful in my life. I look back and I'm just like, wow, I cannot believe I was driving in first gear for so long; what the hell was I doing?

Rainn Wilson: That's a great way of looking at it, yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Where can people find you online and where would you like them to go online, also?

Rainn Wilson: They can find me at @RainnWilson on Twitter and Instagram. I'm on Facebook, of course, all that nonsense.

They can check out SoulPancakes, subscribe to our YouTube channel, and check out Lidehaiti.org and check out the incredible work that his happening in the fields of girls' education, arts education, and what's also called informal education, where it's like education under a tree. That's the future. And if you want to help change the world, it's through education, I believe. That empowers people to make the change in their own communities. So check that shit out.

Tim Ferriss: 100 percent, yeah. If you want to not only help break cycles of poverty but create problem solvers instead of problem creators or passive participants in the world, then education is the force multiplier. Rainn, and for those people who are going to try to find you on the social webs, Rainn with 2 Ns, it's been so nice to chat with you and thanks for taking the time.

Rainn Wilson: This has been a blast. You're great at this and you need your own show. But after I kick you in the face.

Tim Ferriss: You know what? I haven't said this in a long time. Actually, I've never said this; who am I kidding? That makes me sound even weirder than I am. But I'm looking forward to hanging out and getting kicked in the face.

Rainn Wilson: Oh, perfect.

Tim Ferriss: I may insist – I get veto power on the footwear but besides, that, I think we're in good shape.

Rainn Wilson: I won't wear my high heels.

Tim Ferriss: Thanks for that. Thanksgiving, as you said, being grateful should come not just once a year, and thank you for that reminder. Rainn, everybody listening, you can find show notes, links to everything, all sorts of goodies that came from this conversation at fourhourworkweek.com and click on podcast, all spelled out. Or just go to fourhourworkweek.com forward slash podcast. And until next time, thank you for listening.