



How Majo Molfino Helps You Break the Good-Girl Myth

The writer and life designer warns about five self-sabotaging tendencies that prevent us from connecting to our purpose and true strength. In this intimate conversation, she holds nothing back as she talks about how being the daughter of immigrants put pressure on her to be “a good girl.” And breaks down the frameworks that keep so many of us trapped in other people's notions of who we should be.

Alicia Menendez:

Raise your hand if you're a good girl, or like me, a woman who grew up being a good girl and has maybe had some trouble shaking all of the expectations that come with that about success, about perfection, about sacrifice. Well, Majo Molfino knows what that's like too, and she wants all of us to free ourselves of these ideas of who or what we should be.

She's got a new book out, *Break the Good Girl Myth: How to Dismantle Outdated Rules, Unleash Your Power, and Design a More Purposeful Life*, and in it she takes the tools she learned in design thinking and serves them up for anyone who wants to build a life on their own terms.

Tell me about a time in your life that captures your good girl behavior.

Majo Molfino: A time in my current life, like as an adult.

Menendez: Or as a child. I'd take either.

Molfino: Okay. Well, as a child, I can definitely paint the good girl image. I open up my book with this image of me, going to Catholic school, wearing my uniform, being really nervous. My ponytail is really tight. My shoes are very polished. And this feeling of, “Are the girls gonna like me? Am I gonna be accepted?” Having a lot of anxiety about going to school and really feeling like I had to be the best daughter of immigrants I could possibly be to repay my parents. And the way that played out in my later years, in adulthood, has been being a hyper achiever. Like just wanting to excel in every area of life, from work, to every relational role, and having this chronic sense that I'm not enough or I'm failing is what I call the good girl myth of perfection, which is, as we'll get into, my primary good girl myth.

Menendez: What were the messages that you were receiving about what it meant to be good?

Molfino: So, there are four main systems that shape us. The major system that shapes us into good girls is called the patriarchy, which is a cultural and social system that's been around for thousands of years. It has very deep roots and it really privileges men over women and other genders in a way that makes us form a good girl protection mechanism, because we think, “Oh, if we're good girls and we go along with the program and we assimilate, and we are accommodating to the patriarchy, we'll be safe.” So, we develop the good girl mask and the good girl archetype as a protective mechanism, so the main place it comes from is the patriarchy.

But the patriarchy is like an abstract thing.

Menendez: Right. When you're seven, you're not thinking about the patriarchy.

Molfino: Exactly. So, we have to ground it in what I call messengers, so who are the messengers that we have as children that spread patriarchy to us? And these messengers are often... They don't even know they're doing it. One major place is family, so I always ask every client that I work with to look at what are the rules you inherited from your family, the messages you got from your parents, your siblings, your uncles, your aunts, the tribe that you were born into?

Menendez: So, what were the rules in your family?

Molfino: For me, it was very much get the highest degree of education possible, because that's how you get lifted out of poverty, because that's how my father did. So, study hard, work hard, choose a safe path in your career, so that you can earn that salary, so everybody is safe. Don't take risks.

Menendez: You argue in *Break the Good Girl Myth* that there are different types of good girls, depending on which myth is at the core of your value system. So, there's the myth of rules, the myth of perfection, the myth of logic, the myth of harmony, and the myth of sacrifice. You say your dominant myth is the myth of perfection. How did you determine that?

Molfino: Well, I took my own assessment that I created.

Menendez: It felt so fun. I felt like I was in a women's magazine being like, "B, B, B, A."

Molfino: It's like a Cosmo quiz, like throwing you back to your Cosmo quiz days. Oh, good. So, I definitely play into that. I think the one telltale sign that the myth of perfection could be your primary, is my primary, the way that I know is persistent feelings of failure and guilt tend to mean you're probably in the perfection camp. Because every good girl myth has a core fear, and so for perfection, it's the fear of failure. For sacrifice, it's the fear of being selfish. For each one, there's a particular fear that really will tell you, and a particular desire. With perfection, the desire is really to perform.

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Menendez: When I was writing my book, *The Likeability Trap*, I did a deep dive into good girl literature, and there's a lot, as you well know. Some of it is about people pleasing and some is about achievement, but almost always geared at mothers of girls. And of the books that are written for women, I found myself frustrated by how much of the advice was this sort of pink-washed BS that was motivational, but one, doesn't acknowledge or grapple with systems and structures that women are contending with, and two, presents the path to change as just a process of letting go without any real tools with which to recalibrate 30 years of conditioning and training.

And that is what I found so, so valuable about *Break the Good Girl Myth*, because what you do is you give us an actual toolkit, and that is to apply design thinking tools to these very, very personal questions.

Molfinio: Thank you for saying that. It's true. A lot of the good girl books out there have been very focused on young women, and even now, too, a lot of women, like adult women, come and ask me and say, "Can I give this to my daughters?" Almost as if the book isn't relevant to them. And I'm like, "Yeah. After you read it, too." Because so much of this conditioning is subconscious and is really about, and I really did write it for women twenties, thirties, forties, beyond. So, there's that, and then the other thing that you said around practicality is I've always been such a practical person as a designer and a coach, if I had just written a book that was describing the problem and phenomena without any tools or solutions, that would have been a real miss for me.

As a coach and someone who's constantly in the work of transforming people's lives, and is someone who is a designer, who's constantly making things, and working, and engaging with my environment, it was really important for me to have that point of view and I really believe in the power of design thinking.

Menendez: Tell me what you mean when you call yourself a designer.

Molfinio: I think when people think of design, they think traditional design industries, like fashion design, industrial design, interior design, but there's this whole other world of design which was born mostly out of Silicon Valley and design agencies, like Frog, and IDEO, but also the Stanford Design School, that sees design as a much broader process for bringing an idea into form. So, for taking an idea, for anything, iterating on it, and prototyping it, in order to bring it into existence. That's called design thinking. If you abstract it to that process and method, you can apply that to virtually everything.

I've seen that modality work particularly well for women with good girl mentality. Why? Because when you're raised to be a good girl, what is most squashed is your creative confidence. Because you are basically being told, particularly the myth of perfection. You're basically being told to sit on ideas until they're perfect, have impossibly high standards, be precious about how you go about things, and not make any mistakes or take risks. So, if you're raised that way, your creative confidence is low, and so when I went into my master's degree and learned design thinking, I was like, "Holy crap! This completely has unraveled my perfectionism."

Menendez: Let's talk about some of the mindsets of design thinking that you're applying in *Break the Good Girl Myth*. Empathize, which you phrase as seek deeper understanding. What does that look like?

Molfino: The first step in the process for really good design is known as empathy, which is when we are able to put ourselves in the shoes of the other person we hope to serve, really get into what do they need? What do they want? What are their lives like? That's how we can design good services, and products, and experiences for them. Women have an advantage with this phase, because we are so emotionally empathic, and this is also proven through neuroscientific literature, that we can read facial expressions better than men. This is one of the most consistent findings.

Being able to empathize not only with other people, but with ourselves, is how I apply it in this context of good girl mentality. So, as we peel back our good girl layers, we're gonna need to seek a deeper understanding of ourselves by being curious about our wants and needs and what truly matters to us in this lifetime. So, we start with having empathy for ourselves and how we got here, not placing blame or shame, and understand what gives us meaning so that we can redefine success for ourselves and find our purpose.

Menendez: Then there's define, which you phrase as open your minds.

Molfino: A lot of times clients come to me and they think they have a problem, so they come to me because they're feeling lost or stuck in their careers and relationships, but they're actually not stuck. They're not like objectively stuck. What is happening they're either stuck in the mind, which is that they need to generate more options for themselves and believe those options are possible, so what is so powerful about design thinking in this phase is this idea of being generative, and ideating, and brainstorming, so that we can think outside of the lines and outside of the boxes that we have been born into. And I think that this is really particularly helpful for reframing dysfunctional core beliefs about yourself and the world, and also seeing different life pathways that you can take, different relationships you can be in, different possibilities for your life.

Yeah, because like you said, the mind wants to move towards certainty, to security, to what it knows, what it thinks it already knows, and so much of the design thinking process is testing what we call, if we're getting really technical, is testing your assumptions. We have so many mental assumptions about what a user wants or needs, and then when we actually empathize with them, and we actually generate ideas, we realize, "Oh my God." Our assumptions are very narrow and our mind makes a ton of biases and likes to go into little grooves that it already knows. And so, embracing the unknown is a huge part of building that muscle.

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Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Yeah, yeah. You know it's a special reason, since I like to be behind the scenes. All right, so when Cantu Beauty decided to come on board, I rushed.

Menendez: You rushed to volunteer to try the products.

Lantigua-Williams:

Yes, I know. I did. And it's the first time, I know. But I've already been using their Coconut Curling Cream for years, so I figured I wasn't gonna miss a chance to try out sister products.

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Menendez: *So, how many products are you using all told?*

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Menendez: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

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The Wave Whip. First of all, that name is everything, but I love how my waves and my curls just are fuller, they're more touchable, they're less frizzy. I mean, I know, I sound like an ad, but let me tell you.

Menendez: *Well, you can enjoy the benefits of the Cantu Beauty haircare line, picking up your favorites or ordering them from Target.com.*

Menendez: One element of design thinking that I have naturally always gravitated toward and appreciate is prototyping, which you phrase as just make something. Do something. Try it.

Molfino: Yes.

Menendez: What does that mean when you're trying to break a myth about yourself?

Molfino: I have found that for a lot of clients and women that come to me, particularly in thinking about the way forward or how to get unstuck, it's been very much about what I call waiting for clarity, and what's powerful about design thinking is clarity doesn't come from waiting, it comes from making. And it's hard to really wrap your head around that, like, "Well, how can I start making if I don't even know what I'm doing, Majo?" Well, that's how we get to understand what we need to do, is by making, so start with making and then you're gonna get the clarity. And this is a big shift for a lot of people, particularly like when we've generated lots of options for ourselves, we have to actually start to take some of our ideas and put them into form.

Now, if we have very big ideas, let's say we generate a lot of ideas and they're very grandiose, this is the fun part where you have to start to take your ideas and make really dinky versions of them. Almost embarrassing versions of them, like versions that are purposefully imperfect and purposefully messy, and that's why prototyping is the antidote for perfection, because you don't have time to be precious and perfect, because you're

embracing constraints. You're saying, "I have to create a book in one day. I have to do a dinky version of my podcast, a prototype of the podcast I have been thinking about doing for a year. I have to do it in 10 minutes." Go. I'll set a timer for you.

Once you get that, once you embrace constraints through prototyping, then we start to get our ideas out and we generate more momentum in a small amount of time than we have thinking for weeks, months, or years.

Menendez: And then you gotta test it, which you describe as engage someone.

Molfino: Yeah. I'm really into feedback, and people have different feelings about receiving feedback during a creative process. As a designer, the way that I really like to think is feedback is actually helping you shape and craft the idea. So, feedback is the way you iterate, craft, shape, and come back, and come back. Particularly if you want to design something for someone, like you want to create a really cool experience, like you want to build an audience and you want to write a blog. Don't write your blog in a vacuum. Write one tiny blog post. Make it a prototype. It can be a paragraph long. Run it by someone. See how they feel reading that paragraph. Gather that feedback.

In a lot of my programming and my coaching, I get more into how to collect feedback and also filter feedback appropriately, because that's a whole thing, but the point is if we're being good girls we're hiding and we're terrified of asking for feedback and outreaching, because we don't want to be told our ideas are bad, and because we often think that's a reflection of ourselves. We don't want to be told that we're bad, and that we're making mistakes, and that we're wrong.

Menendez: I took the quiz. We're gonna talk about... I have two dominant myths.

Molfino: Awesome.

Menendez: Big on perfection, big on sacrifice. But we're gonna focus on perfection. If you have any of the other formats, and we all have a little bit of them, buy the book. Break your myths. This, though, will give you a sense of how we're thinking through it. Define creative confidence and talk to me about how it comes into play when you're grappling with perfection.

Molfino: So, I'm willing to bet that you're the flavor of myth of perfection which I am, which is more on the achiever side. Is that right?

Menendez: Yes.

Molfino: Okay. Yeah.

Menendez: No, things are sloppy and messy, but as long as at the end there's an A-plus, it's okay if the path there is a little dirty.

Molfino: Yeah. Yeah. Totally. So, creative confidence is the combination of thought and action defines it, so it's the ability to come up with new ideas and the courage to try them out. Now, the last part is very key, because so many of us have ideas, but do we have the courage to try them out? That's the question. And that's the key piece in creative confidence, and that's where if you're gripped by the myth of perfection, you aren't having that sort of forward momentum we talked about that you get through prototyping.

So, my medicine for this is if you're gripped by perfectionism in a way that isn't allowing you to step up in your leadership, that is preventing you from putting your ideas out into

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the world, prototyping is where you really have to look. The women who are low on creative confidence, it's more like the fear of looking stupid or being embarrassed, feeling dumb, whereas for the good girl achiever, it's almost a layer deeper in that somewhere along our upbringing, our worth got hooked to our work. And the fear there is more around failing at work, but they both have a sense of failure, so I thought, "Okay." I write on page 109, "We've seen how the myth of perfection can cripple your creative confidence and block your ability to bring forth ideas, but there's another equally dangerous way it hooks into us. It tells us we're not enough."

"One of the most common not enoughts I've witnessed among good girls, especially those who grew up being told they were gifted, is that they feel they're not achieving enough. They're not doing enough, not being far ahead enough, and not going fast enough." So, what I'm saying is good girl achievers, it's about not doing enough. Those with the sort of creative confidence side, it's about not being smart enough.

Menendez: This hit me hard, which is for those of us for whom the myth of perfection is about achievement, you say, "Practice the mantra I am worthy simply because I exist." I will admit, I have a lot of trouble with this.

Molfino: You and me both, sister. Yeah. This is a tough one. I think this is where I really get into how the patriarchy sort of is like hand in hand and coupled with like capitalism, and performance, and particularly if our parents were immigrants and worked really hard and that was modeled for us, there was this feeling of so much of our worth is around productivity and doing, and that is so deep in our psyche, and so deep in sort of our upbringing and core narrative, that just feeling worthy because we breathe, or because we're here, and present, and we're alive, is... That is a practice. I think it's something that we continuously have to remind ourselves and reprogram in not only our minds, but our bodies.

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Menendez: *Well, you can enjoy the benefits of the Cantu Beauty haircare line, picking up your favorites or ordering them from Target.com.*

Menendez: In as much as it is I think what you are underscoring about survival, and how much that relates to the immigrant narrative, I also think it hooks in with sacrifice, that so much has been given up in order for you and for me to be where we are and to be who we are, that there is a sense that it is incumbent upon us both to pay that back and to pay it forward.

Molfinio: Totally. I have this vivid memory of having a conversation with my aunt in Argentina. I was telling, "You know, I feel so much pressure to do really well in my career, because parents, they left Argentina for us, and they gave us so much." And my aunt looked at me and she said, "Um, you know, your parents also left for themselves." And when she said that I had a moment where I saw my parents not in the role of parents anymore, but saw them as their own kind of selfish people, with their own desires and needs, and hungers, and I think they did of course do it in part for their future generations.

There was this... To call it out frankly, there was an egocentricity about it, where I was thinking it was really about me, like they had sacrificed so much for me, but there was a larger picture that was more nuanced, which is that they did it for themselves, as well, and so chill out. That really helped me unhook a little bit and reorient towards I don't have to feel this pressure to repay that debt. That really worked for me, that conversation.

The myth of sacrifice is really feeling that pressure to give, give and contribute. The issue is what is the cost to us when we do that? Is it costing us our health? Is it costing us our well being? And is that tradeoff worthwhile to you?

Menendez: You have a podcast.

Molfinio: I do.

Menendez: Heroines. Who is a heroine in your own life?

Molfinio: It's a great question. I think the first person that came up in my mind, because I speak about her in the myth of sacrifice, and we're just talking about that, is my mother, who gave up her law career to follow my father's dreams and come out here, and who is an

incredible badass artist, but the reason that I admire her so deeply is that she is fierce with her boundaries. She is a woman who has never had difficulty saying no to me, or to my brother, or to my father. She's a woman who really knows what she wants and goes for it, who spends loads of time by herself creating and has very little guilt about it, is a woman who even though I put her in the book as like here's an example of someone who has sacrificed, in a lot of ways she actually breaks her good girl myth of sacrifice in the ways that she upholds her boundaries and listens to the art she wants to create.

So, I gotta give my shoutout to my mama.

Menendez: I love that. What a novel way of thinking about boundaries, and sacrifice, and what it means to be a mother, and how often we laud women for being selfless. It's like, "So, the best way to be a mother is to lose your entire self? That can't be right."

Molfino: Yeah. That can't be right. This was such a fantastic conversation. I so appreciate you and the depth for which you've understood and felt all these good girl myths.

Menendez: Well, I mean listen, I would not be a good myth of perfection if I had not read the book cover to cover.

Molfino: Oh, I so appreciate you. Thank you.

Menendez: No, thank you. This was wonderful. And congratulations, I think you're gonna help a lot of people with this book.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Production help from Kat Hernandez. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening right now, and please leave a review. It is still the fastest, best way to help us grow as a community.

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