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# ORDINARY MAGIC

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### HOW CAN YOU BECOME AN *ORDINARY MAGICIAN*?

1. Gregory M. Walton defines “ordinary magic” as “the ordinary experiences that help us set aside the ordinary worries of life to unleash extraordinary change.”
  - What are some examples he provides to illustrate this concept? Which resonate with you?
2. “Sometimes,” Walton writes, “it seems the magic is all around us.”
  - What’s a time you’ve experienced ordinary magic in your life? Maybe a time you faced an ugly question, but something happened, or someone said something, that let you see that question for what it was, set it aside, and move ahead.
3. At the beginning of the book, Walton writes, “We’re not going to put a select few magicians onstage as models for the rest of us to marvel at. No one has a monopoly on the kind of wisdom needed to make change happen.”
  - What lessons from the book do you want to take to people in your life: To your friends and family, people you interact with in school or at work, or others in your community?
  - How can you help others in your life see, with grace and dignity, that icky questions they face are normal, that there’s nothing wrong with them, and to see how they can make progress?

### DIGGING DEEPER

1. “Wise interventions” address the big questions that shape our lives: Questions like, “Do I belong?”, “Can I do it?”, “Can I trust you?”, “Am I a bad parent?”, and “Do you love me?” Walton emphasizes that these doubts “are legitimate responses to the world as it is.” They’re normal responses to the situation a person is in.
    - Why is it important to know that these questions come from the situation—that asking them doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with you?
  2. Walton discusses the concept of “surfacing”: “recognizing the psychological situation you’re in, gaining clarity about the question or questions it provokes.”
    - How have you used surfacing—whether you were aware of the term at the time or not—in your life?
    - How can you listen well, to yourself or to others, to better understand the questions that you or others face?
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## DIGGING DEEPER (CONT.)

- Walton draws on “A Case of Identity,” where Sherlock Holmes says, “It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important.” When we’re doing “detective work,” Walton points us to “tifbits”—tiny facts, big theories. When someone has a big response to an objectively “small” event, it’s a clue that that event carries a big meaning to the person. Usually that’s because the event implies a bad answer to a big question the person faces.
  - What’s a tifbit you’ve experienced?
  - Why did this event stand out to you?
  - How does your response help you understand the questions you face or faced in the situation?

## SPIRALS

- People often talk about “spiraling down,” but Walton talks about how we can also “spiral up.”
  - How do upward spirals work?
  - What’s one you’ve experienced?
  - How did it start?
- In what area of your life do things sometimes seem fixed to you?
  - How can you begin to chart paths of growth—to envision a path that is legitimate and authentic for you and the situation you are in?
- Sometimes aspects of people’s identity or experience are represented in negative ways—as a source of shame or weakness. But these same experiences can also be sources of pride and strength.
  - What’s an aspect of your identity or experience that is sometimes represented negatively? How can you invert this and kick off a better spiral? (Consider the “Inverting Identity” activity at the end of Chapter 5.)

## SCHOOL, RELATIONSHIPS, AND HEALTH

- In the book, Walton describes how a few choice words from a parent or teacher can build trust and achievement in children.
    - Share an experience you’ve had that shows how this can happen. Why did this make a difference for you?
  - Walton emphasizes “turning points” in relationships such as when students receive critical feedback on their work from a teacher or have a conflict situation, or when couples have a conflict conversation.
    - How do you navigate turning points in your relationships to build and maintain trust and confidence, whether personal or professional?
    - How do these strategies compare to the wise interventions discussed in the book? What can you learn and take away? What wisdom can you share back?
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3. The book discusses the importance of knowing, when you're new in a school or work setting, that everyone feels out of place at first. Everyone experiences "belonging uncertainty," especially when the place matters so much to you. Sometimes we call it "imposter syndrome."
    - How does it help to remember that this feeling is normal and that it gets better with time?
    - When might another person experience this "belonging uncertainty"? Given your role and relationship, how can you help them see that this is normal, and things can get better?
  4. One of the powerful examples in the book is the Lifting the Bar intervention: The one-page letter that reduced recidivism among kids returning to school from juvenile detention.
    - How did this intervention work?
    - What is "small" about this intervention and what is "large"?
    - What does this example tell us about the potential of wise interventions in policymaking?
  5. Reflect on the postcard campaign that cut suicide rates in half.
    - What does this example suggest about the role of communication and connection in mental health interventions?

Chapters 3–7 end with interactive activities you can use to take charge of the questions you face. Know Your Questions. Use Your Answers. What's an activity you'd like to try? When will you try it?

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