ne might assume there is an epidemic of sadness in the United States, judging by the ubiquitous media advertisements for antidepressants. Yet Americans enjoy relative affluence compared with the rest of the world. Why does happiness seem so elusive?

In this issue, we focus on the various dimensions of happiness. In his article on page 28, Peter Bolland describes how 60 years ago, famed psychologist Abraham Maslow theorized that happiness was a by-product of a life well-lived. Maslow devised a framework known as the Hierarchy of Needs, which charted the stages of our development. It showed that only when basic needs are met can we advance to the next level of development, addressing more sophisticated issues, until we reach the state of self-actualization. At this level, we have mastered the other tiers, and we are the best that we can be.

Yet Jesus told us to “seek first the Kingdom of Heaven” — that our focus on God should come first, and all else would follow. How does this square with Maslow’s Hierarchy, where higher needs are addressed later?

For people who are struggling simply to survive, reaching self-actualization might seem like an impossible dream. However, as spiritual beings, we also know that we can choose to be happy in spite of outer circumstances.

Indeed, this is one of the core teachings in the positive psychology movement. In her story on page 24, writer MaryLou Worthen explains the five building blocks for lasting happiness described by positive psychologist Martin Seligman. Worthen, also a psychologist, finds these elements similar to spiritual principles. She concludes that happiness comes from loving relationships and meaningful service.

Offering still another perspective on happiness is Mark Nepo. In an interview with writer Annie Scholl (page 20), the best-selling author and cancer survivor says that getting locked into preferences or attached to outcomes can block our happiness. This calls to mind the old Yiddish saying, “God laughs when you make plans.”

Rather than “seeking” happiness, Nepo encourages us to be “open” to happiness. “One of the things that stands in the way of our joy and our happiness is the menacing assumption that life is other than where we are,” he says.

Which means all of this may be much simpler than we make it: Perhaps being happy is as simple as noticing the many blessings we already enjoy.

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