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## Seven Quarantine Tips from a Medieval Anchoritic Guide

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Problems in quarantine? Look no further! Quarantine, to us, seems strange—but it was a familiar way of life to medieval anchorites who practiced self-isolation. We fear a virus; they feared the lion of hell (“helle liun”<sup>1</sup>)—but the need to flee the world (“fleo þe world”<sup>2</sup>) was one shared by these anchorites, women and men who chose to enclose themselves in close quarters to pursue a spiritual life. The most popular guide for this lifestyle was the *Ancrene Wisse*, or *Guide for Anchorites*, which addresses problems familiar to our contemporary COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Getting bored? Is it difficult to stay put, when the threat of death is only an abstract number in the news?**

Occupy yourself and make mortality more tangible by following the *Ancrene Wisse*’s suggestion for those who are too idle (“for-idlet”<sup>3</sup>): scrape up the earth every day from the pit in which you will rot (to do this, you should establish a grave site in your bedroom in the fashion of the anchorites).

### **Sick of your family’s food?**

It might be time to climb into that grave you’ve been digging. The *Ancrene Wisse* has no tolerance for the picky eater, recommending that they die as a martyr (“deie martir”<sup>4</sup>) rather than request something more palatable.

### **Lamenting the loss of fixing those layers or highlights at the hairdresser’s?**

Forget beauty and think practically. Regardless of gender (this guide was actually written for women), the *Ancrene Wisse* recommends having your hair cropped or shaved four times a year to lighten your head (“lihtin ower heaved”<sup>5</sup>). You don’t need fancy tools for that.

### **Don’t think FaceTime or instant messages provide enough social contact?**

Actually, they provide too much. The *Ancrene Wisse* censures the original FaceTime and even slow messages: windows should be little (“thurles ... beon ha lutle”<sup>6</sup>),

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<sup>1</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Robert Hasenfratz (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/hasenfratz-ancrene-wisse>, Part 3, line 505. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Part 3, line 502.

<sup>3</sup> Part 2, line 815.

<sup>4</sup> Part 2, line 686.

<sup>5</sup> Part 8, line 168.

<sup>6</sup> Part 2, lines 16–17.

with a curtain to prevent facetime between anchorite and visitor; letters (“leattres”<sup>7</sup>) are prohibited.

### **Ready to turn to your furry friends for comfort?**

Not so fast! The *Ancrene Wisse* is very specific about which pets are appropriate for self-isolation. Ideally you should only keep a single cat (“na beast bute cat ane”<sup>8</sup>), but especially avoid livestock: you wouldn’t want to worry about your cow’s care or have to pay damages (“yelden . . . þe hearms”<sup>9</sup>) when it escapes!

### **Feeling like this lockdown will go on forever?**

Buck up! Anchorites were locked up for life! What is an anchor-house but the anchorite’s grave, the *Ancrene Wisse* asks (“Hwet is ancre-hus bute hire burinesse?”<sup>10</sup>). You may yet escape.

### **Overwhelmed by all of these tips?**

The *Ancrene Wisse* shares a sentiment with The Beatles: “All you need is love.” All other rules, including the ones set out here, serve the “lady rule” (“leafdi riwle”<sup>11</sup>) of love. As long as this rule is nurtured, the others are of little importance.

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<sup>7</sup> Part 8, line 166.

<sup>8</sup> Part 8, line 77.

<sup>9</sup> Part 8, lines 80–81.

<sup>10</sup> Part 2, lines 706–707.

<sup>11</sup> Part 7, lines 317–320; Part 8, lines 182–183.