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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”¹)—but the need to flee the world (“fleo þe world”²) 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”³): 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”⁴) 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”⁵). 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”⁶),

¹ *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.

² Part 3, line 502.

³ Part 2, line 815.

⁴ Part 2, line 686.

⁵ Part 8, line 168.

⁶ Part 2, lines 16–17.

with a curtain to prevent facetime between anchorite and visitor; letters (“leattres”⁷) 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”⁸), but especially avoid livestock: you wouldn’t want to worry about your cow’s care or have to pay damages (“yelden . . . þe hearmes”⁹) 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?”¹⁰). 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”¹¹) of love. As long as this rule is nurtured, the others are of little importance.

⁷ Part 8, line 166.

⁸ Part 8, line 77.

⁹ Part 8, lines 80–81.

¹⁰ Part 2, lines 706–707.

¹¹ Part 7, lines 317–320; Part 8, lines 182–183.