

Rotheiser: Some secrets worth knowing

Monks have secrets worth knowing, and these can be invaluable when a coronavirus pandemic is forcing millions of us to live like monks.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, millions of us have been forced to stay at home, work from home, practice social distancing from everyone except those in our own houses and have minimal social contact with the outside. In a manner of speaking, this has turned many of us into monks, like it or not. What's the secret to thrive there?

Well, I'm not a monk, nor a mental health expert, so what I share here isn't exactly the rule of St. Benedict or a series of professional mental health tips. It's the fruit of what I've learned from monks and from living in the give-and-take of a religious community for fifty years.

Here are *ten counsels* for living when we are, in effect, housebound, that is, living in a situation wherein we don't have a lot of privacy, have to do a lot of living within a very small circle, face long hours wherein we have to struggle to find things that energize us, and wherein we find ourselves for good stretches of time frustrated, bored, impatient, and lethargic. How does one survive and thrive in that situation?

1. **Create a routine.** That's the key. It's what monks do. Create a detailed routine for the hours of your day as you would a financial budget. Make this very practical: list the things you need to do each day and slot them into a concrete timetable and then stick to that as a discipline, even when it seems rigid and oppressive. Resist the temptation to simply go with the flow of your energy and mood or to lean on entertainment and whatever distractions can be found to get you through your days and nights.
2. **Wash and dress your body each day,** as if you were going out into the world and meeting people. Resist the temptation to cheat on hygiene, dress, and make-up. Don't spend the morning in your pajamas: wash and dress-up. When you don't do this, what are you saying to your family? They aren't worth the effort? And what are you saying to yourself? I'm not worth the effort? Slovenliness invariably becomes lethargy and acedia.
3. **Look beyond yourself and your needs each day** to see others and their hurts and frustrations. You're not in this alone; the others are enduring exactly what you are. Nothing will make your day harder to endure than excessive self-focus and self-pity.
4. **Find a place to be alone for some time every day and offer others that same courtesy.** Don't apologize that you need time away, to be by yourself. That's an imperative for mental health, not a selfish claim. Give others that space. Sometimes you need to be apart, not just for your own sake but for the sake of the others. Monks live an intense community life, but each also has a private cell within which to retreat.

5. ***Have a contemplative practice each day that includes prayer.*** On the schedule you create for yourself, mark in at least a half hour or an hour each day for some contemplative practice: pray, read scripture, read from a serious book, journal, paint a picture, paint a fence, create an artifact, fix something, garden, write poetry, write a song, begin a memoir, write a long letter to someone you haven't seen for years, whatever; but do something that's freeing for your soul and have it include some prayer.
6. ***Practice "Sabbath" daily.*** Sabbath need not be a day; it can be an hour. Give yourself something very particular to look forward to each day, something enjoyable and sensual: a hot bath, a glass of wine, a cigar on the patio, a rerun of a favorite old sitcom, a nap in the shade in a lawn chair, anything – as long as it's done purely for enjoyment. Make this a discipline.
7. ***Practice "Sabbath" weekly.*** Make sure that only six days of the week are locked into your set routine. Break the routine once a week. Set one day apart for enjoyment, one day when you may eat pancakes for breakfast in your pajamas.
8. ***Challenge yourself with something new.*** Stretch yourself by trying something new. Learn a new language, take up a new hobby, learn to play an instrument. This is an opportunity you've never had.
9. ***Talk through the tensions that arise within your house – though carefully.*** Tensions will arise when living in a fishbowl. Monks have community meetings to sort out those tensions. Talk tensions through honestly with each other, but carefully; hurtful remarks sometimes never quite heal.
10. ***Take care of your body.*** We aren't disembodied spirits. Be attentive to your body. Get enough exercise each day to keep your body energized. Be careful not to use food as a compensation for your enforced monasticism. Monks are careful about their diet – except on feast days.

Monks do have secrets worth knowing!