

Letters to Friends

Marriage Advice for Teens
(and for the rest of us)

Written December 1-31, 2011

by

Tommy and Jodi Jinks

For Jacob and Samantha Rickman

Married December 23, 2011

This document was edited by Mrs. Leah Ammons. She did an awesome job of cleaning up our poor work and offered a few cool conventions to help put the voice of the documents in the right context for those not intimately familiar with the relationships involved. She is an amazing editor and was very, very careful not to change the message of the letters in her editing. In cases where that was a danger she flagged the guilty text with comments and asked us to rewrite it. In some cases we ignored her recommendations for our own wacky reasons. Which, essentially, means that if you have reason to think that something isn't right, isn't clear, is stupid or is simply confusing it's our fault. Completely.

[Ed. Editorial comments like this one were written by the authors and, ironically enough, **NOT** the editor... just so you know...]

Permanent File Location: <http://jinksto.com/blog/?p=1808>

These letters are emails that we sent daily to our friends Jacob and Samantha the month surrounding their wedding. At the time that they were started, Samantha and Jacob were both 18.

About her (*as discussed in a recent blog post*)...

"I've watched this little girl grow up. She's spent half of her weekends over the last 10 years at my house. She's not related to me but she calls me Uncle. She was just a wee little thing when our families first met so its been a while. I even had to spank her once. She still tells stories about it." ... "This 'child' has set goals and fought for them and proven herself. She is strong in her faith and in her relationship with God. She is fond of reminding folks that she earned that white dress. She is an amazing, shy, bright, sweet, honest, devout, Christian woman."

About him...

Jacob is a local fellow who began hanging out about three years ago. From the beginning, he was clear that his intentions were to court Samantha and marry her. Pretty lucid for a 16 year old, honestly. Over the intervening years he managed to convince us all that he was serious (including, eventually, Samantha (*yay!*)). When Samantha made it clear that he really needed a steady job if he was planning to marry her, the boy finished high school and joined the Air Force. He'll be working on airplanes for them. Jacob was away at training when we started this series and returned to marry Sam over the Christmas holidays. Gotta love a man that sticks to it like that. (*We've never had to spank him... yet*)

These letters contain advice for living. Rather than the seemingly mandatory unsolicited marriage advice given by others--lofty ideas about what marriage "should be"--we thought that they needed more concrete advice. We wanted to give them advice to live by, clear and direct and useful (*and fun!*). The emails here have been edited to remove some of the more personal or private details, but (we think) they still make for good advice.

Day One

Dear Samantha,

Aunt Jodi and I were talking last night and realized that there is so much that we want to tell you. We love you both and want to share our experiences with you in a vain attempt to make your life together as happy as ours has been.

We talked about writing it all down but there just isn't time for that so Aunt Jodi came up with this idea. For the month of December we're going to send one email with a piece of advice every day. As for what you do with this advice; well the first one might help. It is this:

All marriage advice is bullshit.

People share things with you that they think will help or that they wish others had thought to tell them when they were just starting out. They do this out of love, but in some cases they only know these things because they screwed it up first and are offering you a different approach that might or might not work. In other cases they DID eventually get it right but only the second (or third) time around.

Marriage advice from folks that have been married more than once is suspect but not always invalid. The world has changed a lot in the last 10 years, so things that used to work might not work now. You will have to decide for yourselves, in partnership, what will get you out of whatever hole you find yourselves in, and there **will** be holes; get used to that now. Pray, save the advice away, seek new advice as needed, think about how it applies and then do your own thing together and live with the consequences. That's what we all do every day.

All of our Love,
Tommy and Jodi

Day Two

Decide Now to Make it Work.

You two are blessed to know so many people with strong marriages... learn from them. Both of our parents divorced while we were young and we chose to never let that happen. You need to make that decision too. You should make it now.

Day Three

No yelling. Ever.

We know you've seen your parents do it (we've all seen that from our parents) but... well, they'll learn one day.

Agree now, make it a family rule, stick to it.

Yelling doesn't do anything but hurt the other's feelings, and why would you want to do that to the one you love?

If you need to raise your voice then stop talking. You can't win an argument by yelling louder. To avoid yelling is as simple as to avoid arguing. Discuss things and determine a course together. When you get angry, stop... think about it, pray, and then have the conversation again, quietly. It's even OK to call a time-out when your partner gets angry and starts to raise their voice. Just remind them of the rules and ask to talk about it later. It's perfectly fine to disagree, just remember that disagreement and argument are two different things.

Think about why she wants whatever she wants.

Think about why he wants it differently.

Give a little or a lot to make each other happy.

Touch when you discuss things. Sit together on the couch or on the bed. You'll find that it's really frickin' hard to fight with someone who's holding your hand.

More on touching later (*woot!*)

Day Four

Have fun. Do things together.

At first this will be both very easy and very hard. You'll be excited about doing things together, (*not that! well... ok, that too but...*) but you won't have the money for a coke, much less anything fun. That's cool. Sit at home, play cards. Go for a walk. If you have a little extra gas go for a 150 mile drive just to see what's there, have lunch together and drive back. Go to church together on Sundays when you're both off work. Hang out at the house. Watch TV (once you get one). Invite friends over for dinner. It doesn't matter if it's Mac & Cheese; your friends will be broke too. Some of our best memories involve nothing more than eating hot dogs with friends and watching kids play.

Aunt Jodi and I had some very hard times at first, but we always made time to have fun (and still do). With all of the other crap that's going on in life it's nice to have that one place, that one person, that you know you can go have fun with. Now, years later, those hard times don't seem like they were really all that hard. We just remember the fun that we had together in each disaster that we found ourselves in. Those are good memories to have. They remind you that things are probably going to be okay the next time something goes wrong.

Day Five

We know that we said one piece of advice per day but we've been thinking about you guys a lot today so we're going to cheat. These are just random thoughts about things that we wanted to share.

We don't have "jobs" around the house.

If Aunt Jodi doesn't want to cook, it's not her job. If she doesn't cook, then either I have to do it or we don't eat. Usually, she cooks, but it's not her job. Each of us does whatever needs doing. That's in a perfect world anyway. Usually she does more than me around the house, but if she doesn't do it I will... eventually... usually. It's most fun when we're cooking in the kitchen together. Cooking together is hard to do but after a while you work out a system. Try it occasionally.

We tell each other everything important.

That doesn't mean we recite everything we've done in a day; it means that for the important things... we share. That's why when Samantha asked Uncle Tommy not to tell anyone about your marriage yet he said, "Well, I have to tell Aunt Jodi but that's it." ... he has to tell her. There can't be secrets between us about anything. This rule is, of course, invalid for Christmas gifts! Jodi can ask Tommy anything, and he can tell her anything.

Aunt Jodi told would like to remind Jacob:

It's the manly thing to do to go to Wal-mart or Costco and buy feminine products for your wife.

Tommy agrees, *but there's no rule that says we have to get all excited about it. Heck, he's not even sure if he spelled feminine right.*

Pro Tip: *Buy something else to cover up the box in the buggy, and then slip it onto the checkout belt when no one is looking. Still, it's better to just man up and carry the dang things; it says, "I've got a girl that you only wish you had and she's worth it". That goes for her purse too, by the way. Just carry it when she asks, it impresses other wives.*

Cornbread Recipe... because, dude... important!

- 1 cup self rising flour
- 2 cups yellow corn meal
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup milk
 - Preheat oven to 400° F.
 - Thoroughly grease and flour a 9" × 9" baking pan (or a cast iron skillet).
 - Sift together the flour and cornmeal.
 - Add milk and eggs and mix just until everything is moist and mixed well. No more than 10 seconds or so. It'll still be a little lumpy, but that's OK. Over mixing makes the bread tough. This really applies anytime you're using flour... the less time it's wet before you cook it the better... like seconds.
 - Once it's mixed, pour it into the pan and bake it immediately.

- Bake 25-30 minutes or until a toothpick inserted into the center of the cornbread comes out clean and the edge of the bread starts to separate from the pan.

Living on Love

We ate a couple of cases of MRE's over a couple weeks once, because we didn't have money for food. It's not McDonald's, but it'll keep you alive, and they're easy to find on a military base.

[Ed. MRE's are military rations or "Meal, Ready to Eat". Also known to soldiers as "three lies in a bag"]

Ask for Help

Random people will help you out sometimes if you ask. Jodi convinced a propane truck driver to hold our check for gas one Christmas. He took the check and didn't deposit it until we had money in the bank a week later. It was the only thing that kept us from freezing to death. If you need help, ask. People won't always be able to help but sometimes they will, and sometimes that's just enough.

Related to that:

If you're trying to make it you will. God will provide a way. Always. It might not be the way you **want** to go but it'll be a way out of dark times. Follow Him.

Day Six

[Ed. Rob and Tracey used in the examples here are very dear friends of ours and are Samantha's parents. We are legal guardians for their children in case of disaster. We consider them our brother and sister in a lot of ways. Sam and Jacob know this relationship intimately so the ideas presented here make sense to them. Additionally, Jacob and Rob have a very tight bond so the idea that he might seek advice from her father isn't as farfetched as it might seem.]

This is going to be a long one. This one is important. It's so important it has a title:

I LOVE BEING MARRIED TO YOU ... (but not your mother)

Today we're talking about secrets. It is important that you realize that even among the best of friends, some secrets remain between you and your spouse. This all applies doubly so for less-than-perfect friends and workmates. We are going to use Sam's Mom and Dad as examples in this because you both know that we are very good friends; beyond good friends.

As you both know, Rob and I share a lot of things that are very private. I know things about him and his family that would be damaging or embarrassing if I shared them with others and he knows many of the same things about Jodi and me. However, it is understood that whatever we talk about will be shared with our wives. My trust in Rob extends almost universally to Tracey, but if I don't want Tracey to know something I simply don't tell Rob.

Basics: Trust & Secrets with friends & spouses

1. *There is an expectation that if I share things with Rob that he will share them with Tracey if they are important enough.*

I trust Rob to make good decisions about what is important for him to share with his wife, and he trusts me to do the same. Beyond that, I trust both him and Tracey not to share things inappropriately. That trust took literally years to build, and all four of us know that it can be destroyed with a single error. We work very hard to make sure that this doesn't happen.

2. *Some things should not be shared even with the best of friends.*

Those things are private to me and Jodi, and she trusts me to maintain her secrets so I don't share them with anyone... even Rob. I cannot break that trust because I want to tell someone else; I can't break it for any reason.

Trust in a marriage is critical.

Once you are married (or, really, since you became engaged) some things should be just between you. We won't tell you what those things are because the list is endless, and we don't want to give you a checklist as much as a general guideline.

*It is a delicate line, but a general rule of thumb is that if your spouse were to find out that you told something to someone and he or she would be hurt by that then you probably shouldn't share it (this applies both ways of course).

If Sam thinks that Jacob will call his dad (or her dad) and talk about things that she doesn't want dad to know, then she won't tell Jacob those things and that is a death sentence for your marriage. You **must** be able to share everything with your spouse. That trust must be sacred between you. That means that if Jacob wakes up one morning and is a total jerk, Sam can't call her mother crying about how horrible he is. He **will** find out and will be hurt by that breach of trust. Sure, he shouldn't have been a jerk but it's her problem to deal with. You're both adults now; telling mom and dad about things in a hope that they'll be on your side or talk to your spouse for you will not be good for your marriage.

A couple of examples:

*Many years ago Aunt Jodi borrowed money from Tracey to pay part of our bills without telling me. I was very angry (I hate that "no yelling" rule sometimes!) because she shared our difficulty paying our bills that month without talking to me about it first. It was a breach of trust and we talked about it for a long time to make sure that it never happened again. On the other hand, I've loaned Rob money out of our "emergency fund" in the past to help him cover bills (darn two way streets). I didn't mention this to Jodi because it wasn't important and we keep that money specifically to help folks out. She later asked me where the money went and I told her, "Rob borrowed it". We didn't talk about why he borrowed it because it wasn't important. **However**, if she had asked me why Rob needed the money I would have told her. If she had asked, I would have recited the whole conversation because once she asked it would have been "important" and I would have been completely honest with her.*

Good point:

Just because Tommy doesn't think something is important doesn't mean that Jodi doesn't think it's important. When we said "he thinks it's important enough" we really meant "if SHE would think it is important enough."

Trying to explain that something really wasn't that important to you after the fact (even if it really wasn't) can be... difficult. Jodi also provided several good examples of this phenomenon... none of which I'm willing to share... she was on a roll there for a while... dammit...

So, while it is important that I maintain trust with Rob it is, by far, more important that I maintain trust with Jodi.

An important point here:

Share everything with your spouse and nothing with anyone else--even those that you trust implicitly. Don't keep secrets from each other... but keep each other's secrets. Make sense?

*It is mandatory that I share important things with my wife. It is **not** mandatory for me to share things with Rob's wife. If Rob were to tell me something and ask that I not tell Tracey that's cool. Likewise, if his wife were to share a confidence with me I wouldn't tell him unless there was a reasonable expectation that I should. .*

As I said, this level of trust took many, many years to build. It grew slowly and it can be destroyed easily.

That said, it's perfectly fine to share things with people that you trust **if** you both agree. If Sam wants to get her mother's advice on...errr...feminine issues (or whatever), that's fine as long as Jacob knows that it's happening. If Jacob wants to talk to his dad (or Rob) about the stress of being married to Sam that's fine too, as long as Sam knows that he's going to do it.

It's **not** okay to call mom and dad (or anyone else) to say, "You won't believe what she spent money on!!!!" unless your spouse knows that you're going to do it. It's **not** okay to call mom and dad to ask for help with money unless you both agree that it is needed. If you decide, together, to seek advice or help then it's perfectly fine, but you both must agree and you need to realize that Mom is probably going to tell Dad (or the reverse) even if you ask them not to.

Your parents, your family, (including Jodi and me) and your friends love you very much. They are an important part of your life. That should never change. However, you should always remember that they are a part of your family, not a part of your marriage. God designed marriage to be between a man and his wife and only those two people. When you add others to a marriage it cannot survive.

Tomorrow... a short one.. we promise.

Day Seven

You can do this.

You've been given a **lot** of advice from a lot of different people. Some of it has been really good stuff. Some of it... not so much. Still, even the less than positive feedback can be good advice if you take time to think about what it means. Why would those people not support you? What character traits in you made them think those things? It might be something to look into and understand in detail. They're (probably) not doing it just to screw with you and in all likelihood they are really being honest. Take time to understand it and, if needed, make adjustments to the way you do things, but don't let it tear you down. We know they're wrong; **why** are they wrong?

We **know** you can do this. You are both committed and you're both very intelligent people, (whether you know it or not) . This marriage will be hard, there's no doubt about that, but don't mistake that difficulty for something that it's not.

You can't make this commitment, this promise before God, and then give up on it because someone gave you bad advice when you were a teenager. You're not too young. Jacob has a steady job and a good work ethic. Sam knows how to find a job. She knows how to work and keep house. You can do this.

The other night we had dinner with a couple who were married at ages 17 and 19. They've been married for 26 years. We shared stories about the tough times that we all went through trying to make it. We shared stories about only having a single piece of furniture. It **was** hard but we made it and we have absolute faith that you can be in the same place in 20 years.

Grab on to each other with all of the devotion and love that you can find, reach out to God for guidance, and hold on! It's going to be fun; it's going to be a lot of fun.

Day Eight

Tips for living:

1. *Women like candles and pretty things that smell good..
Men don't get this, but buy them anyway.
Trust us.*
 2. *A man should be able to unhook a bra with one hand in under 2 seconds. Practice this, it comes in handy when she's being snooty at the grocery store (and, occasionally, at other times). Don't practice on yourself... seriously, what's wrong with you?*
 3. Ironing clothes isn't that hard. Use the hot thing to make the wrinkly thing flat while avoiding actually setting things on fire. It'll save you money over having the cleaners do it.
 4. Women like having flowers delivered by the delivery truck and it (usually) doesn't cost extra. In a pinch or for special occasions, you can deliver them yourself but normally you should have them delivered. *Also, they will flatly deny that they care about flowers at all. They lie.*
 5. If you want to know if he's thinking about having sex with you, ask him. If he says "no", he's a liar.
 6. *Put the toilet seat down. Don't fight it; just give up now.*
 7. A woman has a period, on average, every 28 days. The length of the period is 2-10 days but can be **much** longer if she's really mad at you.
ProTip: *Leaving the toilet seat up makes this longer.*
- [Ed. Samantha found this really really funny...sorry dude.]
8. Open the door for her anytime you can. *Chicks dig that.*
 9. *Fixing her breakfast in bed will get you lots of points. Even if it's dry toast and burned eggs, she'll love you. Just kidding about the burned eggs; those are nasty, get rid of them. The toast should be okay though. Actually, screw it; just fix her a bowl of Cap'n Crunch. She'll love it anyway.*
 10. *Fixing him breakfast in bed will get him to go back to sleep.*
 11. It takes half the water if you share a shower. It takes 1/4 the water if you share a tub.

Trust us... or bring extra towels to clean up the mess.

12. Men love tools. Women love stealing them and leaving them in the laundry room or a kitchen drawer. If your pliers are missing, look there first. *(I don't know where the hell the screwdrivers go... if you find out call me.)*
13. **When no one has your back, move your back.** When you hit someone swing with your shoulder, not your arms. Long punches get ducked... get close, hit hard. Knock his ass out on the first punch. It saves on torn shirts.
14. Don't hit people. It's not polite; unless he says, "Go ahead; take your best shot". Then, see above.
15. To break up a fight do it from behind and never by getting between the fighters; that's how you lose teeth. Just grab the collar of his shirt and start walking. This is sometimes easier if you let them knock each other out first.
16. If you have to ask if it was "good" for her, it wasn't. Don't bother asking. Better luck next time.
17. Play with kids. They know how.
18. Know where the main power breaker is in your house and how it works. Be able to find it in the dark without shin guards.
19. Know where the water and gas shut-off valves are and how to use them.
20. Let her drive you sometimes; you're man enough to handle it. *You can pretend that you're a star or something and that she's your hot driver... until she makes you pay for lunch.*
21. Credit cards suck! Use them responsibly or not at all.
22. Learn to cook bacon because... Dude, really? Bacon!

Day Nine

No hitting.

We have a no hitting rule. It applies to both of us. Not even just playing around. Try tickling instead!

ProTip: This doesn't apply to a completely inappropriate pat on the bottom in the Wal-mart parking lot.

Day Ten

Counting the days!

“Maintain” your marriage rather than “fixing” it.

As you've seen by the varied and wandering list of advice that we've been able to think up, a marriage has a lot of moving parts. We've shared many of these things because they're part of maintaining your marriage...

Letting him know that you really love him and that he's your hero. Letting her know that you respect and adore her. Doing these things with every word and action every day.

...The little things that we've mentioned (and the big ones too) are just a part of making a happy home but you have to do it every day. You should watch your spouse and understand their moods. You have to continue to earn respect from one another every day. A broken marriage doesn't "break" in a day. It takes months or years for you to get to the point that one or both of you are ready to give up. You can prevent that by stopping anywhere in the process and reaffirming your love for one another. It might be unexpected flowers "just because" or a daily ritual (*Aunt Jodi fixes me coffee every morning without asking... just because she loves me*). It might be as simple as sitting down together for an hour and just talking about what hurts. Whatever, remind each other that you care.

It's the little things that you do that remind your spouse that you still want your marriage to work...

- Keeping your word to one another about the tiniest things is a big help.
- *If you promised to bring her a coke on your way home and you forgot; go back and get it. Show her that she's worth the extra effort for no other reason than to make her happy.*
- *If he's had a bad day at work, cook his favorite meal, or just sit quietly beside him while he works it out in his head. If he wants to talk about it, then talk with him. The same goes for her. It might be boring office stuff but it's important to your spouse so take the time to listen. Give them the help that they need to work through the problem and get over it. Sometimes just listening is all it takes.*

This all probably sounds silly now. In a few years when you're both working and have kids going several directions at once it will be **very** easy to let your marriage slide as "more important" things pop up. Always remember that your marriage IS the more important thing--pretty much always. Without it, your family (and your life) will fall apart. Maintain it, and you'll never have to "fix" it.

Day Eleven

Revel in doing grown up things together.

It's okay to have fun shopping for towels together. Buy your first piece of furniture together; even if it's a bean bag; especially if it's a bean bag!

It's a huge, huge world out there, and you're free to explore it. See new things, and create your own memories so that 20 years from now you can share them with someone else just starting out.

Day Twelve

[Ed. Some of you may be surprised that Christians not only have sex but are allowed to enjoy it. We might disagree on technicalities but we all agree that it's an important part of marriage. This was our attempt at having a little fun talking about a very important (and oft overlooked) topic. We sought the advice of a number of Christian scholars both before and after writing it. Of course, we couldn't share the email with most of them but we posed most of the questions here as hypotheticals. We've included a followup email here as an addendum which contains a bit more of an explanation but, really, it is what it is... we just wanted to be as open and thoughtful as possible with this one while keeping it interesting for teenagers. Don't worry, it's all terribly embarrassing for us too...]

AUNT JOANN QUIT READING NOW!!!!]

Sex!

(OMG Uncle Tommy! NOOOOoooo....)

This is a long one (*that's what she said! (DUDE! Stop it!)*)... right, uh... enjoy

Oh yeah!

Sex is an important part of your marriage. By now you know that most marriages break up over just three or four things. Experts disagree on what those three or four things are but sex is always on the list no matter which other items make it. We think that there are only, really, four... communication, trust, respect, sex. There's always the Money issue too, of course, but (we think) that rolls up into trust and respect so... anyway. We only bring this up because, interestingly enough, communication, trust and respect all feed into sex. Sex also helps you to grow respect and trust and allows you a chance to work on your communication. They're all intertwined.

In order to keep this sane (*and so Uncle Tommy doesn't have to close his eyes when he types it*) we'll stick to (mostly) high level concepts... *Sorry, if you want a book on sexual positions he'll send you one but he said he "ain't writing it." (Thank God, right?)*

[Ed. That was a joke... seriously...]

Let's talk about the three things that we think feed into sex first and why we think that is.

Communication:

There's more to sex than just the missionary position. However, the missionary is a "safe" bet. Almost everyone does it that way and it's sort of the accepted standard for "if you don't do

nothing else, you'll do this". It's safe, it's sane, it's fun and heck, let's be honest, it feels good. Still, even if this is your only choice there needs to be communication involved. Does it hurt? It shouldn't beyond the first few times. Communicate that. Stop, figure out what's not working and why. That doesn't mean that while having sex you have to stop and have a conversation every time that you want to try something new. A touch in the right place, a nudge at the right time, a gentle kiss just where it's needed. All of these things and more can be used to communicate. If you're working together it's easy to have a conversation without talking. This, however, can be confusing sometimes (especially at first) if you're not on the same track. It's okay to just stop everything and ask, "what the heck is it that you want?". That works too. In fact, while you don't **have** to stop and have a conversation there's no reason that you can't. Sex isn't a script. It's a gentle, flowing river of feelings that leads you into a love deeper than you can imagine. Part of that sharing is sharing your heart and feelings with your partner so if you need to stop and have a conversation... do it. That said, sometimes you just need a single word to communicate... faster, slower, harder, softer, stop, whatever words you need. Use your big person words.

Trust:

There is a lot of trust that goes into a loving sexual relationship. Your spouse (and we mean both of you) primarily needs to trust that you're not going to hurt them. They need to know that when they say, "no, don't do that" that you'll stop instantly. If it's something that YOU really want to try and your partner says no... skip it and talk about it later (you should have talked about it first). Don't throw up your hand and say, "well screw it then... if we can't do it my way why bother." That's a very selfish attitude and it damages both trust and respect. Just because your fantasy isn't working out the way that you want doesn't mean that you can't do something different and still have an excellent experience. You'll be married for the rest of your lives, there's plenty of time to explore new things. Which is a good point actually... Just because you've decided that something is "off the table" right now it doesn't mean that as your trust and respect for one another grows you can't circle back and talk about it again. That doesn't mean that you can hound your partner about it incessantly until they finally give in though... it just means that every year or so you need to stop and ask yourself the same questions that you should be asking now... "what is acceptable to him... to her... do we need to explore new things?"

Respect:

Your partner needs to know that no matter what they submit to or offer as an alternative in a sexual relationship that you will respect them. Once you have a true and honest respect for each other there are a lot of places that you can take your sexual partnership. No matter what we might do in the bedroom (or even on the front porch! (STOP THAT!)) we need to know that tomorrow our love will be stronger for that shared experience.

Tips:

Jodi wishes to note that she is completely innocent in all of this and wasn't even here when it was written. One suspects that she was in the kitchen doing her best to emulate June Cleaver by baking brownies... or something...

* Get comfortable with being naked. If you're shy, that's fine, take the time to explore one another. Spend an hour touching every part of your spouse... every part. Take showers together. Take baths together. Play chase in the house naked (this tends to be frowned upon once you have kids (or dinner guests!!))... whatever it takes. Over your lifetime your partner will see you in some pretty embarrassing places. Even outside the bedroom (Tommy says: Ever

been to a gynecological exam? I have. I needed to be there to support her. I did it but... Dude!). If you are comfortable with your bodies, that sharing becomes a lot easier in every instance. Love each other for your differences. Get over what you perceive to be your faults and realize that your partner loves every inch of you... not just your cute face. Fingers, knees, arms, thighs, toes (even that freaky hereditary thing you have that's totally embarrassing)... everything. If they didn't they wouldn't have married you. At the same time it's your job to make sure that your partner knows that you love every inch of them.... do not fail in this.

* SEX IS NOT ABOUT ORGASM... get over it. It's not the finish line for a race. Sex is about sharing yourselves as deeply as you possibly can. That means looking into one another's eyes while you are close. It means enjoying the touch of your partners skin along your whole body and not just... umm... that single point of contact. Watch your partner's face as the things that you're doing affect them. Notice what makes him or her feel special, do that. Realize that it's your touch causing them to make those faces... those sounds... those... ahem... never mind, you get it. Love each other. Go slow and take your time. Enjoy each second of it. Do things that feel good. Share them. When you're "finished" lay together and talk, or not. Just enjoy holding your spouse for a while. That's what sex is about. Orgasm is just a reminder that you have to go to work tomorrow and should go to sleep soon.

[Ed. I love that last line...]

* Except... sometimes sex **is** about orgasm. Sometimes a "quicky" is a great way (and the only way) for the two of you to connect when everything else in your life is blowing up. It's fun, sometimes, but it isn't for daily use.

* Porn is not sex. Forget all of the trash that you've downloaded off the internet. It don't happen like that. Those people are professionals! On the other hand, just because you can't play in the NFL doesn't mean that you can't enjoy a game of tag football occasionally. *nudge* *nudge* *wink* *wink* (WTF!)

[Ed. Though we thought it was implied here we realize that some folks might think this an endorsement of pornography. It is not. Pornography incites lust which is "bad"(tm) and (we believe) is all rather sad. This is simply acknowledgment that we know they clicked the "wrong" link occasionally. They will probably deny it but her daddy has the router logs and we can check! Anyway... we just wanted to clarify that.]

* Plan ahead. That doesn't mean that you need a project plan but think about what you're doing. Having to get up and go find a towel after sex (eww... what IS that?!) sucks when all you want to do is lay together and hold one another. Contraceptives, lubricants, whatever... make sure everything is handy so that you don't have to stop and go look for AA batteries at the wrong time... (WHAT!!?? You did NOT!!!) *cough*

ProTip: in a pinch, steal batteries out of the TV remote.

[Ed. We clarified over cigars with Jacob one evening that the batteries were for an electric toothbrush. What the heck were you thinking!?)

* Just because you don't feel sexy doesn't mean your partner doesn't think you are. The fact that you forgot (or didn't want) to shave your legs doesn't mean he will think less of you. It just means that you forgot to shave your legs. Whatever. If you're REALLY worried about it fall back on communication and say, "I don't want to because I didn't shave my legs and don't feel sexy" and then see whether that changes his mind... (hah hah hah... you thought that made a difference? Really?)

* That last one works both ways by the way. Thinking that you don't want to because you didn't get a shower after work? Point that out and maybe she can help with that shower.

* Seek medical assistance for an erection that lasts longer than four hours. Bwah ha ha ha ha (don't worry, you'll figure out why that's funny soon enough).

* Submit to your partner's wishes. Not every time, not every day. Occasionally though it's fun to just let one of you do whatever he or she wants. You might not enjoy it as much as other things but if your partner does and you can make that sacrifice without affecting trust and respect do it. Again, occasionally and don't do things that will damage trust and respect between you... even if your spouse wants to. You know the rules (or should) so stay in them or talk about it first. If you're not ready for something then say "no" and wait until your trust in one another grows stronger. You'll get where you want to be... just take your time.

* Consummating your marriage doesn't do a thing. Marriage isn't about sex. Marriage is a covenant (or promise) before God. Sex is an important part of marriage but it isn't the only part. From the moment that you stand before God and declare your intentions you are married. If you don't have sex on that first night you'll still wake up married. I don't know how that would happen but... anyway, the point is that marriage and sex aren't the same thing. That sounds obvious but think about what it means for a second.

* Glorify God. That doesn't mean restrict yourselves to the missionary position (missionaries do it in the trees... (ewww)). It means, that whatever you do needs to be done for the right reasons. It means that sex between the two of you should be about growing the bond between one another and making your marriage stronger. Doing things that cause you to lose the trust and respect of your partner doesn't glorify Him.

[Ed. Or more correctly... huts... sometimes in trees too we guess... We know some missionaries... maybe we could ask them for you.]

* Sometimes you don't know you wanted sex until you're already having it. This is a tricky one because, if you **really** don't want to you shouldn't no matter how much your partner begs. Sometimes though you're thinking that you'd rather just go to sleep but spending an extra hour together might not be so bad. Try it; see where it leads. It might help you sleep better.

* Don't be boring. Even if you decide to restrict yourselves to the missionary position that doesn't mean that you can't do it on the couch, or the front porch, or the kitchen table or... umm... never mind. Just realize that because you never saw them doesn't mean that your parents haven't had sex in every room in the house (OMG... STOP!)... including the closets. Just sayin'.

* "A roll in the hay" sucks! Hay is all sticky and prickly and it has dust that makes you sneeze at

awkward times and cause strange and embarrassing things to happen. We don't know how this one got started but... take a blanket. Seriously.

* Don't talk about sex with others. Sex between the two of you is the most personal part of sharing with your partner. It's not for the world to know. It's not for Facebook. It's private. Lots of people like to cross this line but you don't have to. You shouldn't be embarrassed to talk about the sex that you have with your partner... you just need to be circumspect about what details you share. You should love, respect, and trust each other enough not to need to brag about sex with your friends. I know what happens in my bedroom and that's enough. No one else needs to know. That said, a teasing bit of innuendo probably won't hurt much if you do it in the right spirit. Just be careful with it.

* Be the instigator. It gets boring having to beg for sex all of the time. If your partner is usually the one who takes the lead, switch it up a bit and make sure that they know that you love them enough to think of it first. It makes a huge difference.

* Do it differently. Don't let sex become monotonous. Even if you're only sharing the missionary position think about what leads up to it and what follows it. Don't do the same things in the same ways every time. Turn the lights on, or turn them off. Try it under the covers and on top of the covers. Change things up whenever you can.

* There's more than one sexual organ. Fingers, Tongues, lips, elbows (elbows?! WTF? (Ok, just kidding about that last one)) and all of them work (except elbows...sheesh)... use them all. (eww ewww ewww... stop writing!)

* Occasionally, do things that REQUIRE you to keep them secret. Have sex in your parents' house, dance naked on the kitchen table (uh.. not at your parents house, I have to eat there); whatever it takes to grow the bond of trust between you.

Share, Love, Enjoy

Day Twelve (addendum):

RE: From Samantha; cc: Jacob:

Oh my goodness, I died reading this. I was so laughing the whole time o^_^o and super blushing. I'm glad no one was around while I read it.

I love you Tommy :) Thank you for being so....blunt haha

RE: From Tommy; cc: Jacob, Jodi:

You're very welcome. We just feel like there are a lot of people that give you advice that is "directive"... they're telling you what to do.

In some cases, that advice is directed by God and that's okay if they can back it up in Scripture. Your parents really fall into this category. They would never give you advice that isn't Godly. They may not actually be able to SAY the same things that we can but they are at least giving you the tools to work it out.

In other cases, the advice is directed by a failed or overactive sense of decency that prevents them from telling you what they ACTUALLY do. They're still in "do as I say, not as I do" mode and are forgetting that very soon you will be on your own and trying to figure all of this stuff out for yourselves. That's okay too, really. They remember you as the little kid that they knew and don't want to admit that you've become beautiful adults. They really love you and want to give you a good start and, I guess, that's okay.

Aunt Jodi and I want to do things differently. Though some of the things that we say may seem directive, they're really not meant to be.

We want to give you advice that you can use every day. You'll note that we didn't include a lot of scriptural reference here. That is intentional. You are both strong Christians and know to include God in all aspects of your life and we trust you to do so in everything... including sex. There's no point in our reciting those things. This email is a little on the edge but everything in it is Scripturally sound. If you find something that's not please feel free to ask about it... you might be surprised, because, honestly, sometimes we're wrong too. :-)

With deepest love and respect,
Tommy and Jodi

Day Thirteen

Sorry, this one is a little late. After yesterday's letter we needed time to recover.

Be proud of where you came from.

Much of the work that we've done over the past few years was very much for you two and your siblings. The cookouts, the work that we found to do, the days on the lake. All for you...

We all come from very close rural communities. Back when we all lived in Chicago, Rob and Tommy began to feel like Sam and Beth were missing out on some of that and wanted you to experience what Family meant to us. *That's how Aunt Jodi and I became your aunt and uncle.* You didn't have family that lived nearby so we invented one for you to give you a taste of what having a close family means. Now, living near Uncle Scott, that is less needed but the point is that we're proud to come from close families in rural America, and we wanted to give you some of that too. Hopefully, it has worked to some small degree.

As you move around the world, you'll find folks that pick on you for being from the south. Hug them, bless their heart, and move on. Don't try to change and become more cosmopolitan to suit others. Be proud of who you've become; keep your southern accents, and keep the willingness to work and do the right thing that we've beat into you over the years. Rob and Tommy have worked at the biggest banks in the world. They've helped set the direction that those companies took and made those international companies boatloads of money by picking the right paths. All of this from a couple of guys without college degrees that very simply wanted the best for those that they love. You've both been raised to have that same impact on the world. College degree or not.

Go, do that.

Day Fourteen

[Ed. We turned this email into a blog post shortly after it was written. That had less detail. This version is a lot more personal. If you've read the blog post you should probably read it again here. It'll be worth your time.]

Read your Bible.

Sounds easy. It's not. Sure, we all read our Bibles in church when someone is reading a verse or three to us... but think about the last time you sat down and read a whole chapter?

There's so much in the Bible that never gets preached, and so much that never gets studied. There are tools to help you figure your problems out. There are solutions to problems that you never knew you had.

You know all of this, but it's easy to forget. We're not telling you to "study" your Bible here. You should, of course. Dig into the details and understand exactly what it's telling you and why. That's good. It's very good. Sometimes though we'd rather pick up a trashy novel and just zone out for a while. You can do that with the Bible too... zone out... disappear into the story.

Sometimes you just need to read it without all of the work. Start at the beginning of a chapter and just read. Enjoy the flow of the words. The way verses flow one into the next. See the overall story and not just bits of wisdom in verses to be aptly applied. The stories in the Bible are beautiful tales of wondrous things that really happened. The words and phrases that it uses are poetic and... well, beautiful. *As a writer, even one that's not very good, I hate using the same word over and over in a single letter but in this case "beautiful" applies in more circumstances than not. I honestly don't know how to describe the Bible without using those words... beautiful, wonderful, glorious.*

Some of our favorite books? Psalms, of course. Proverbs is awesome, and the most beautiful book: Luke. Matthew is wonderful if a little hard to understand at times, and Romans provides a path to salvation that is very enlightening. It doesn't matter though. Pick any book that you like. Read it.

We have written thousands of words in these emails trying to share things that we have seen work--things that we know will help you in the troubled times ahead. Sam's mom and dad have devoted every waking moment of their lives to Sam and her siblings for more than 18 years. Since Jacob arrived they've done the same for him. They've made hard choices and given you the best advice that they could. They have agonized over those choices, and begged shaking and crying on their knees before God that they be shown the right decisions. They have cried tears of love for you. They have cried tears of rage and tears of sorrow because they could not see clearly how to guide you at times. They have lamented the mistakes that they made and prayed to God that they never make them again. I know this because we are their dearest friends, and we have seen the tears. We have heard the prayers, and we have prayed some of

the same prayers and shed some of the same tears for them and for you.

And yet, if you read the Bible you will find that this dedication and love is not new to the world. Here is the first chapter of Proverbs. It teaches something that we've all been trying to teach you for years. It teaches wisdom and right... in 33 verses, God spells out clearly what has taken mortal men and women a lifetime of teaching to share with you. Read it with us... we've removed the verse numbers, skip the words you don't know, just read it, not as verses but as the story that it was intended to be.

Proverbs, Chapter 1

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young-- let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance-- for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them. If they say, "Come along with us; let's lie in wait for someone's blood, let's waylay some harmless soul; let's swallow them alive, like the grave, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; we will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder; throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse"-- my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood. How useless to spread a net in full view of all the birds! These men lie in wait for their own blood; they waylay only themselves! Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away the lives of those who get it.

Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech: "How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you.

But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you-- when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you. "Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the LORD, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will

live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm."

In Proverbs 16 these same ideas are mentioned; here are verses 20-24:

20 Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.

21 The wise in heart are called discerning, and gracious words promote instruction.

22 Prudence is a fountain of life to the prudent, but folly brings punishment to fools.

23 The hearts of the wise make their mouths prudent, and their lips promote instruction.

24 Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

"Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."

How beautiful and meaningful and direct. There is such beauty in the Bible that we miss when we study too closely. Study too, always study and understand, but sometimes you need to stop and see the whole story--just read. It is divine, and grand, and lofty, and sublime, and yes, it is beautiful. It is all of those things, and it is the Word of God.

Day Fifteen

Payday!

1. Buy a coke.
2. Realize that you've spent all of your money until the next payday.

We'll talk about money more after the wedding but start thinking now about the fact that YOU don't have anything. WE do. There's no his money or her money. Only our money.

Day Sixteen

Rules of Civility

You don't have to use them, (unless you're at my house) but they are all good ideas. Most of them earn you instant respect from strangers. They allow you to start conversations with people. You both are very good at most of these, but practicing them is fun (if only because people don't expect it anymore in our rude society and it surprises them). More importantly, they make us proud of you.

- 1) Defer to women. Defer more to women who are elderly or pregnant. This means:
 - * Open the door for them. Even if you have to wait 30 seconds for them to actually get there.
 - * If this confuses them, and it might, just say, "after you, ma'am"
 - * Give up your seat to them. If a woman is standing and you are sitting--you're wrong. If I offer a woman my chair and she refuses, then we both stand and leave the seat empty.
- 2) Defer to your elders.
 - * Open the door for them.
 - * Let them go ahead of you in lines if you get there at or nearly at the same time.
 - * Ask them if they need assistance anytime you see one working alone? Loading a car at Wal-mart? Changing a tire? Can't reach something at the grocery? "Can I help you Sir?"
- 3) Respect everyone.
 - * If someone asks you a direct question that can be answered by "Yes" or "No," then answer with "Yes, Ma'am" or "No, Sir". It doesn't matter how old they (or you) are.
I recently had this conversation with a young teenage counter attendant at the local ice cream shop
 - "Would you like nuts with that?"*
 - "No Ma'am, thank you."*
 - "Oh! You don't have to call me Ma'am!"*
 - "Yes ma'am I do. It was beat into me at an early age."*
 - *giggles* "Well, thank you, sir."*
 - "There you go!"*
 - Now, whenever I see her she says, "Good evening sir, what can I get for you today?"*
Awesome!
 - * If someone is praying no one wants to hear your religious views. If you don't believe what they believe, fine. Shut up. Be quiet until they're done, and then continue with your day.**
 - * If you are invited to someones house for food (especially if you are a secondary guest), no one cares if you're a vegetarian or if you don't like something. Just serve yourself beans and get over yourself. If you're offered something that you don't like, don't frown or grimace... just say, "No, thank you."
- 4) Respect your country.
 - * When the national anthem is played:
 - 1) Shut up.
 - 2) Stand up if you are able.
 - 3) Remove your hat if you are male.
 - 4) Place your right hand over your heart.

5) Listen to the words.

6) Sing.

* This applies any time the flag is presented too.

4) Respect your company.

* If you're with others, put the book or phone down.

* Check your phone irregularly for messages.

* Don't play games on your phone. If you're that bored, go home.

5) Manage your children.

* Don't make others do it for you.

* Don't manage others' children unless you're responsible for them.

* ... or it's your house.

With close friends you can relax with some of these rules. That said, you can rarely go wrong with implementing them.

Day Seventeen

Love God, love each other, love life.

Day Eighteen

Learn something. Anything.

When you've learned it, then learn something else.

Pick up things that interest you, and learn how to do them. The "but I'm not mechanically-inclined" argument is stupid. Anyone can learn anything that they want.

I can scuba dive and fly airplanes. I can cut trees with a chainsaw and turn them into pens and boxes and toys... or a porch for the house. I can build computers from parts and write programs for them. I can type more than 100 words per minute and create articles that move people to laughter or to tears as I want. Jodi can take photographs of the world that we all see and find the beauty that we all miss. We didn't know how to do any of these things when we left home at 18 either. We learned it all on our own.

It doesn't matter what you're learning. Just have a passion for it and figure it out. Share your passion with others. If you don't have the skills, learn them.

Day Nineteen

There's an old saying. "*A man's word is his bond*".

A bond is an amount of money (or other collateral) that someone puts away to prove that he's going to do something. "A man's word is his bond" means that the only bond you need for something is simply your word or promise. If I loan a friend a thousand dollars, we don't need courts and lawyers and contracts for me to feel comfortable that he's going to pay me back. All I need is his word, his promise. This applies to all facets of life though, not just money.

In the old days folks rarely used contracts. They would create a verbal agreement and would shake on it. If you promised to do something and shook hands to prove the agreement you were bound by ethics and moral codes to do what you said you would. This isn't as common as it once was, but I take it just as seriously as my grandfather did. Sometimes there's nothing that you can do about it, and you fail but you must try to make your word good.

Other times it hurts. Sometimes you've agreed to do something, then things in your life change which make whatever it was very hard to do, but you can't back out.

Recently, I talked with a man about building a pig cooker for me. We agreed that he would build it and that I would pay him for his work. We shook hands on the deal and that's all that was required for him to spend two weeks of very hard labor building something that I wanted. I owe him that money and I've had to take money out of our Christmas budget to pay him. He accepted my word as my bond and did the work that I wanted. It wouldn't be right for me to cause him and his family to miss out on something for Christmas because I failed to make good on my word but, really, the circumstances don't matter. I made a promise and I am bound to honor it whether there are contracts or lawyers involved or not.

Many folks these days are complaining because "the evil banks" are repossessing their houses. The banks are "evil" because they are taking homes away from people. It's sad, and we feel bad for those people. What gets missed is that those people made a promise to the bank. They gave their word that they would pay their mortgage if the bank would loan them the money to buy a house. The banks gave them the money, and then those people didn't pay the bank back. Now, they're homeless because they made a promise and didn't keep it. They call the banks evil for trying to get the money that they loaned these people back. It's not the banks that are "evil" here. They held up their side of the bargain. Unfortunately, those people exist.

Be cautious in picking your friends. If they don't keep their word to others then you can probably guess that they're lying to you. If they lie to their boss they'll probably lie to you.

All through your lives you will make promises to people. Your bills are promises. The electric company gives you electricity because you have promised to pay for it. The money that you

borrow for a car is a promise to pay for that car. You must honor those commitments. To not do so is a lie; a small one probably, but a lie nonetheless and we don't have to explain to you why that's wrong.

Even if you don't actually utter the words of a promise-if it's just something that is expected of you and you fail to meet that obligation without correcting the thought then you are bound by it.

This is not always easy and sometimes you have to make sacrifices to things that you love dearly to meet your commitments. Many get away with not doing it... for a time. But we all must stand before God and account for these things. Don't let those promises lead you onto a path that will cost you more than you can imagine.

Let your word be your bond.

Day Twenty

Prioritize.

There's so much to deal with in everyday life that you have to make priorities to keep things straight. For the next few years those priorities will mostly be around money. When you get paid, where does the money go? Does this bill get paid on the 1st or the 15th?

After a while you'll figure out how best to do things but it works something like this:

The idea is that you start at the top of the list and pay things in the order that you think is most important. You can, of course, move things around as you like but, really, this is pretty much it.

Baby Food

Mortgage/Rent (because you HAVE to have a place to live)

Diapers (it's either that or using spare pillow cases)

Car note (because you HAVE to get to work)

Electricity (because refrigerators don't work without it)

Gas for heat (because it's South freaking Dakota)

Gas for the car (because you have to go to work)

Car insurance (you need this to legally drive)

Water/Sewage bill

Food for you (including bread and bologna for lunch... every... freaking... day)

Laundry expenses (because you need clean undies and most apartments don't come with a washer and dryer)

Baby clothes (ask around, most people have them to give away!)

Telephone/cell phone

Credit or other bills

Tithe to the church

Once all of that stuff is paid then you get to do the "other" stuff.

Baby toys

"Essentials" like shoe polish, brasso, and other "military supplies"

Clothes for you

School costs

Birthday gifts

Christmas gifts

Anniversary gifts

Annual vehicle registration costs

Fun stuff

Trip to McDonald's

Random Soda

You can pay some bills on the 1st and others on the 15th so that you can better manage your money. Also, some companies will let you change the date a bill is due. The idea is to split the

top list in such a way that you have money left over for the second list after both checks. The third list? Forget about that for a couple of years, but you'll eventually have enough to afford to eat out occasionally.

Some of these bills you won't have immediately, but you need to start planning for them now. How much does baby food cost? It seems cheap when you look at it on the baby food aisle, but what happens when you take that .98 cent jar of food and multiply it for three meals per day times 15 days? It comes to \$45 or so which will be about 5% of your check and that's if you shove the same food at the poor kid every day. If you subtract about 60% of your check for rent, subtract another 20% for food for you and 10% for car notes and gasoline you've already spent 95% of your pay for the month. You have to find the things that you can cut out of your life to ensure that you're providing for your family adequately. Don't buy new things at first... focus on just staying alive on your own for a bit and then slowly add things as you know you can afford them.

It takes a lot of work and will power to ensure that you have everything that you need across both checks. It takes even more work and will power not to stop for a McDonald's burger on the way home from work. Be sure that if you don't pay your bills people will come and take your stuff away. You're both aware (painfully so) that if you don't take care of the children first, people will come and take them away too.

I dunno, we don't really have any good advice for this one. It's still a struggle for us every month, and we've been doing it for almost seventeen years without kids (of course, it gets a **lot** easier after the first five years or so). It's your job to figure out how you manage it every month.

[Ed. Sam's parents have been involved in foster care and adoption for several years now. They know better than anyone the pain that is caused by poor parenting]

Day Twenty One

[Ed. Jacob was away training to work on airplanes for the Air Force. He flew home for the Christmas Holidays (oh... and to get married and stuff) on day twenty one.]

About the Wedding...

Fly safe dude. You wouldn't believe some of the nuts that they let work on those airplanes.

This one's for Jacob.

You're looking forward to seeing one person, but there will be a lot of folks here waiting for you. They'll be frustrating and forward and hugging everybody. They'll want to sit between you and hold your hands. They'll ask you questions that will make you blush, and they'll say crude things with a wink. Some of them will be uninvited and others probably should have been. They'll ask about things that are none of their business. Ignore them. Just play along for four or five days and things will calm down. You guys have a plan. Share what you want of it; ignore the rest.

They love you, but they won't show it very well.

They're proud of you both--Sam for graduating high school before she got married (close one!) or pregnant (SCORE!), and Jacob for, against all bets, having a job before getting married. Which reminds me... someone owes me \$20.00.

[Ed. Sam reminds us, again, that she earned that white dress and is proud of that fact... you go girl!]

Seriously though. These people **are** proud of you both and rightly so. You're awesome people and you're trying really hard to do the right things. That's commendable for a lot of reasons.

The best advice that we can possibly give you for all of the next week is to hold onto one another and hold onto God. Weddings are really weird things. There's so much love floating around that someone will get their feelings hurt, and then all hell breaks loose. It'll all be because things aren't going like **they** think it should be. Whatever man, don't get involved in it, just focus on your wife and do what **she** wants.

Until they make her cry. Then it's your job to step in and settle it.

It's her wedding, honestly, and (we think) she should get what she wants (within reason). You should take her side and let people know what's going to happen. Don't say, "I think" or "Could we?"... say, "We are going to...". You don't have to get angry or yell. Just calmly let folks know that you've made a decision and intend to follow through with it. That's your job.

If you don't agree with her either talk about it alone and come to a decision or do it her way

anyway. Never take someone's side against her. Just say, "Sam and I would like to talk about this alone." And go. It's her job to listen when you say that, and agree.

This wedding will be a fragile time in your life. Handle it carefully. Things can go so very wrong if they're allowed to get out of control, and I'm not talking about people being mad for a few hours. I'm talking about people being mad for a few years, or maybe decades or longer. I've only talked to my mother-in-law three times since our wedding because of things that happened at our wedding. Before that we were fine. After that... nothing. It got out of control and people hid it from me until it was too late to fix it, or I would have done the things that I'm telling you now. There were people pushing my wife around, people that love her... they made her cry.

For years, Jodi couldn't even look at pictures of our wedding without crying. What a terrible thing to do to someone you love--what a terrible thing to have allowed to happen. It still hurts to think about it even sixteen years later. We've long since forgiven them, but that doesn't take the hurt away.

Don't get in a brawl. Just man up and take a stand. Rob will back you and, if needed, I'll back you too. We may not agree with your decisions, but we'll respect your right to make them as a man. If the three of us can't beat them into submission... well, I dunno if that's possible but it sure would be funny if it happened. You know, in a sad kinda way.

I'm talking about the big stuff here. Nobody cares what color the cake is or whether you should use plastic forks or silverware. Let them have their way. For the big things though, for the things that Samantha cares about... the only thing that matters to you is that wondrously beautiful woman that will be at the other end of the aisle (err living room, whatever, work with me here).

When I saw Jodi that first time in her wedding dress... she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She looked down the aisle at me and I forgot everything. I don't remember the church... or the people that were there or the preacher. I remember her walking across the room to me... ME. We kneeled and stood and repeated back the answers at the right times and the whole time I remember holding her hand. I don't remember my best man handing me the ring... nothing. Just her.

I still feel that way almost every morning when I see her for the first time. That is what you're there for and making that happen brother, is all you.

Just remember, if no one's got your back, move your back.

Day Twenty Two

You've got a lot to do today so a short one.

Smile whenever you can.

Laugh as often as you can.

Find the fun in every boring task (sometimes it works).

We know that we've painted a pretty bleak picture, at times, since we started sending these emails. That's fine, life really is that way. It's dark and foreboding and hard. But it's also bright and shiny and fun. Sometimes both on the same day.

Work hard; fight for what you want for each other, but always take a break to smile occasionally. As Christians you are ambassadors to the rest of the world. Not many folks are interested in being part of something that doesn't make you smile.

Sleep well tonight, tomorrow's going to be a loooong day. If you guys need anything at all let us know. We're here to help.

Day Twenty Three (Wedding Day)

Wow. It's here.

I'm at a loss for words...

Ha!

Ok, so, it's your wedding day. Of course you're excited, but are you scared? You should be. Not because your life is about to change forever but because today... today, you stand before God. How awesome and terrifying is that?

We all know that God is watching us every day (even if we try to forget sometimes), but today His attention will be on you specifically.

Today, when you stand in front of your family and friends you will stand before God Himself. If that doesn't scare the hell out of you (no pun intended), you're an idiot and we all know that neither of you are. The eyes of Glory will watch you as you make a promise to Him, and through Him, to your spouse. He knows your heart. He knows if you are being honest when you stand before Him and make this promise. He knows about every doubt that you have. He knows about every careless desire that you have. He doesn't care about those things in this. He cares that when you make this promise, you do it with a convinced heart.

He knows that you have doubts. He knows that you have fears. He knows that in some things you are unsure. He knows all of this and He will accept your promise as you stand, filthy, scared and scarred before him. He loves you, and He will help you through all the remaining days of your lives if you remain faithful to your promise. If you fail in this though you are in for a world of hurt.

It's okay to have doubts; it's okay to have fears, and it's okay to be unsure on such a momentous occasion but in this promise you must be convinced and convicted. Pastor Nathan will be there in front of you, but do not doubt that when you say all of the words of your vows and commit to them with "I do" that those words are spoken directly to God. Not to Nathan and not to Sam or Jacob. The promise extends to your spouse through Him, but it is not made directly. When you say those vows say them as reverently as you would a prayer. Say them as if you are speaking directly to God because... well, you will be.

We will pray for you tonight as we have prayed for you every night that we have known you, both of you. In return for this devotion and love we only ask one thing of you: Please--before everything gets crazy today find somewhere private where you two can be alone and pray together. Take 10 minutes, get on your knees, hold hands, put your heads together, and beg God for direction in this. Confirm before God that your intentions are pure and honest. Confirm this, too, before your spouse.

Enjoy the attention of your family today. Enjoy the celebration of your new life together. Most of all though--enjoy, respect, and honor this chance to stand before our most awesome, mighty, sovereign God and make a promise to Him.

Day Twenty Four

Look at your wife. Say, "Good morning, my wife."

Look at your husband. Say, "Good morning, my husband."

Revel in those words. Giggle at them. Laugh openly and happily.

Go outside today. Have lunch somewhere. Introduce your wife to people as your wife.

How beautiful those words were to me--to us. How awesome for me to be able to tell people "This is my wife, Jodi". We would stand and look at one another in amazement and say, "I have a wife"; "I have a husband".

Love,
Tommy and Jodi

We have told you many times that we are proud of you. We remain proud of you this morning. You handled the wedding gracefully. You identified risks ahead of time and came up with ways to deal with them. You smiled and were happy and dealt with annoyances carefully.

It was beautiful and moving and sweet. You were both careful to be true of heart and sincere and you consulted advisers and God before taking this step. You have done well and have become adults in every sense now.

Day Twenty Five (Christmas)

Continue Traditions.

Things that we have shown you and things that you know to be true. We're not saying embrace Santa Claus here. We're saying do things the "right" way, or consistent with traditions that we've taught you when you can. You've seen your parents and us do the same thing every year on Christmas. We cook basically the same meal, and we all eat it together.

We've done the same thing on Thanksgiving and, usually, Easter. Heck, sometimes we do it just for fun. When you have kids, you'll find that you miss those old traditions and those times with family. As they grow you'll want to share those times and traditions with your kids. You'll do that because you'll be sitting some lonely place on Christmas one year and realize that you had so much fun as a child. Those were perfect days and you'll want them for your kids too.

You'll find all kinds of celebrations out there. People in different places celebrate things differently. Sometimes a little different, sometimes a lot. They'll be new and fun when you encounter them, but if you ever find that something just seems to be missing from Thanksgiving or Christmas try cooking an "old fashioned" meal and having good friends over to eat with you. In most cases you can even show some of your traditions to others... "I'm from the south... this is the way we do it!"

Find friends that remember those same good times and join them. Most of all though... don't be afraid to start your own traditions. Share your joy of life with your kids and share your memories of days with Mom and Dad... days that were perfect and happy. Find things that you like and do them together. Make those things perfect and happy too.

Day Twenty Six

Things to remember:

A few different things today-

1. Only one of you should give medicine. As you have kids and pets you'll need to give them medicine occasionally. That should always be done by one person. It doesn't matter which of you it is... in our house it's Jodi. The reason for this is to avoid messing it up. There are two ways that it can go wrong. Each of you might think the other has done it, and the poor kid goes without medicine. This usually doesn't hurt too much if it happens only once, but it is sad. The more dangerous thing is double medication. If one of you gives the kid a pill at 6PM right on time and the other gives the kid a pill at 6:15PM without realizing that it's already been done you can create a very dangerous situation. Especially with prescription drugs. They can (depending on the drug) kill or make you seriously ill. Even if it's just "a little Tylenol" for a cold... one of you should never give the kid something without talking about it first. That doesn't mean you can't medicate... just that you need to communicate it first (first is important). So, if Sam is the person that gives medication and Jacob thinks the kid needs a dose of Tylenol he just needs to call her and tell her what's happening. That way you both know that 1) She didn't medicate the child before she left home and 2) not to medicate it again when she gets home and finds a sick kid. You can do this other ways but they take more communication and work. This way is pretty much fail proof if you stick with it.
2. Learn how plumbing works. Kids flush the damndest things down a toilet. Usually it's fastest to just reach in there and get it... bless their hearts...
3. Don't just do something, stand there. You've both been trained for this. To think before acting. The old saying, "Don't just stand there, do something" is wrong. Often in an emergency the worst thing that you can do is "something". You should always, slow down, think about what you're getting ready to do, and then act quickly. Never act before thinking. Sometimes that decision is easy. If you see a kid drowning in a swimming pool it's pretty easy to see the consequences of not pulling them out of the water. However, if you see a traffic accident and someone is hurt do you help them out of the car or keep them still until help arrives? The first instinct is to "help them out of the car," but the right thing to do is to keep them still until professionals get there... unless there's a fire, then things change. Think before you act. The general rule here is "don't make it worse".
4. *Today when you were holding each other on the couch I started to tell you to quit, and then I remembered that you are married . After remembering that I thought it was awesome to see you share your love publicly. The last time I told you to behave on my couch you were just kids... :-)* And that was just last summer!

[Ed. It was totally inappropriate! There was... kissing! And on MY

couch!]

When I said something about it today, Aunt Jodi said, "Yeah, it's okay. We do that too". That's true. We do, and we love it. It's not uncommon for us to hold hands while walking across a parking lot. In Church I hold her close to me with my arm around her. We hold hands when we pray. Today we did what we told you to do before your wedding. We put our heads together and held hands as we prayed. When we were done I kissed her on the forehead... right there in church. It was an amazing and peaceful moment for us. Don't lose that affection for each other. It's easy to get tied up in everyday things and forget to touch and hold one another. Below is a picture of Jodi's aunt and uncle taken today in Louisiana and posted on Facebook. They taught us by example much of what we've been sharing with you. They've been married 63 years so it is possible to share love and intimacy forever.

I told Aunt JoAnn that we were going to show you this picture and she said, "*it was not all a smooth ride! We are just very determined people who happen to love each other a lot*"... Why does that sound familiar? These two folks have been and remain role models for us. Fifty years from now we want to be just like them.



[Ed. with more hair...]

5. Read to each other. A chapter of the Bible, books, stories, these emails... whatever. *I'm not good at this, but I love when Jodi reads something to me. I get to watch her concentrate on reading and listen to her voice. It's soothing and comforting and*

beautiful.

6. Ask for assistance before you need aid. You know that your parents are there to help you when you need it, but you need to act quickly when you see a need. The difference is a simple one. Assistance is that help that you require before you need aid. Aid is that help that you require after things have gone to extremes. As an example, if you know that you can't pay your electric bill this month, you need assistance paying it. You have a few days to work it out before the bill is due. If you wait until they turn the lights off to ask for help then it becomes an emergency because you need the electricity back on right away.... there's no time to work out how, it just has to be fixed now.
7. Asking for help is actually harder than it sounds. It's hard to admit that you've screwed up and spent something incorrectly. It's harder still to ask for assistance. But it's only fair to the folks you're asking for help. If you tell someone that you can't pay the light bill this month, it's relatively easy to transfer money to you over three days or so. If the lights are already turned off, then someone has to drop everything they're doing and find a way to get you money in a matter of hours... that's not always easy (or possible, bank transfers take 3-5 days). Sometimes things happen quickly; sometimes you make a mistake and discover it too late. That's okay too... just ask for what you need.
8. The second that you figure out something is going sideways: talk about it, decide together if you need help, and then ask as soon as possible. Always ask if you need it, though. Ask your parents, ask us, ask a local friend. Get help first, then get it right. You should, of course, try everything that you can to manage on your own, but when you're in trouble you should ask for help getting out of it. We've done it. Heck, we've done it by asking the very people pictured above. They sent us money, they sent us love, they helped us through tough times in many ways and more than once. *(Tommy is a slow learner)*
9. Thank you both for spending time with us today. You've had a very busy week with a LOT of people wanting your attention and to spend time with you. It is always an honor when our friends choose to spend time with us. It is no less so with the two of you. We truly appreciate you taking the time to hang out with us.... *(even if we did sort of have Sam's parents as hostages).*

Day Twenty Seven

Everything is different. Everything is new.

You're already seeing that no one was kidding when they told you that your life was about to undergo a major change. You'll notice it in the little things. Like the first time that we referred to you as our friends--not our pretend niece, or Rob's kids, or that boy that's been hanging around Sam--just honestly and simply our friends. You'll remember many of those "firsts" forever. Enjoy them and cherish them.

Day Twenty Eight

Be friends.

*Jodi and I were friends before we ever dated and still are. She is my best friend. Forever.
Ohh eemm gee! I have a BFF!*

We do things together just to hang out. Not because we love each other but because we **like** each other. Sometimes we talk... sometimes we just sit on the patio and say nothing for hours.. Be married, be in love, be a family, all of those things rock. Just be friends while you do them.

Day Twenty Nine

Go outside. Explore things. Get off of the trails.

Some of our best memories were created outdoors and usually nowhere near anyone else. Find state parks near you and explore them. If you see a national park, stop and explore it. Rent a boat and go for a ride on a lake.

We once found a sandy bottom swimming hole just by stopping on the side of the road by a creek on a national forest and walking along the creek. It was a hot summer day and the swimming hole was just big enough for the two of us. *Aunt Jodi won't let me tell the whole story but the long walk into the forest was totally worth it... trust me. 8-)*

Find time to get lost when driving. If you have extra time on a trip just hang a left in the middle of Mississippi and see where the road goes. Plan a route that only uses back roads occasionally. There is so much beauty in this country that no one sees because it's not on the interstate.

Take a train trip together if you can. Just call Amtrak and see where you can go. Save up until you can afford a sleeper car. *Again... trust me. 8-)*

The best part about most national and state parks is that they are mostly free or very cheap. All you need is gas, a tent, and a sleeping bag.

Just stop anywhere along the road on a national forest and go see the things that God has created there. We once found a hidden view of the Grand Canyon in Arizona by doing this. No tourists, no rangers, no guard rails, no warning signs, just the two of us sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon as God intended... so cool.

We once found a beautiful view of a river by stopping on the side of the road and walking beside the river. There was a high bluff or cliff there so that we could watch the sun set over the river. Remember what we said about a roll in the hay (Day 12)? That goes doubly for pine straw.

Go. Explore. Enjoy.

Day Thirty

Make Awesome Happen.

Boring. Mundane. Repetitive. There are reasons that man has created these words. We have been telling you stories about how awesome life is when shared properly, and it is--but the vast majority of life is boring and, well, mundane.

The hard truth is that "boring" happens automatically. As does mundane. To experience awesome you have to create it. We have had lots of awesome times at our house. We have had a blast at pig roasts that had 20 or so folks over to hang out with us. You have both spent hour upon hour in our swimming pool having what you will remember as some of the happiest days of your lives... Those things took lots and lots of work. The pool took daily maintenance to keep it ready for those few hours on the weekend when you used it. Pig roasts take weeks of preparation and work... from cutting the wood to getting the pig, to getting up at 3:00 in the morning to start the fire. We did that work joyfully because we knew that we were making something special... something awesome. We purposefully made sure that you two were involved in the processes for these things so that you would know that it can be done.

Love like we have--like you have--helps make the mundane, boring days okay. To feed that love and grow it, you have to build memories that are good and happy. Your life is a collection of memories that you build. You can make those memories awesome so that you will remember your life as being... truly... awesome, or you can live mundane, boring, every day life and remember your life as mundane and boring. It really is your choice. People like us, who are joyful and happy in life get that way by making awesome happen. We work for weeks on end so that we can sit on the pool deck with a Dr. Pepper and watch other peoples' children try to drown each other. We slave to cook a pig for a get-together so that we can teach a young man how to sit by the fire and turn the meat with a stick, and so that we can sit beside the fire with the dearest of friends and talk about all of the awesome memories that we've created with one another.

Live your lives; abide the boring days. Do the mundane things to stay alive, but don't let washing dishes, washing clothes, and/ or washing children be the only memories that you have to look back on. Don't let those days in a beat up, above-ground pool be the "best times of your lives." Occasionally, just occasionally, make awesome happen. You already know how to do it, but if you get it wrong... meh, so what... do it again later.

Day Thirty One

Role Models: Get them. Be them.

Tommy recently posted this on Facebook: "*you are never so old that you don't need role models; you are never so young that you can't be one.*" You both know the importance of finding people that you respect; understand what aspects of their character that you like and then emulate that. We have shared some of our own role models with you. Sam's grandfather remains one of Tommy's role models and Jodi's aunt and uncle (who we talked about on day 26) are role models for both of us. Seek out those role models. Apply them to your life. Most of all though, seek to be a role model for those around you. Even at your "young" ages you have much in your characters that is to be admired. We hope to see more of those character traits develop over the next couple of years. Work on that. Being a couple that people can admire will allow you to begin conversations with those people-possibly conversations that will bring them closer to God. This is an awesome responsibility, and it is one that we should all bear. Be those people.

Don't forget to write. People at home will be interested in how things are going for you. They'll want to know that you're okay and are making it. You will, of course, call your parents and post things on Facebook, but you can't call everyone and we'd really like to hear from you. Sam writes beautifully, and we'd love to see more from her. Consider writing a few blog posts for us to read or, if nothing else, drop us an occasional email with the details.

This is the last day that we'll send you advice. We promised to do it every day in December and today marks the last day. You are adults now which changes our relationship a little. You are our friends. We love you both a great deal and will do anything for you but you have your own household to run. We won't offer you advice or direction again unless you ask for it. If you ask for help with something or ask what we think about an idea or how we would deal with a problem, we'll be happy to share our opinions and experiences with you--but only if you ask. In the end, this is more a matter of respect than anything. It shows respect for your marriage and the folks that you've become.

A note from Tommy:

Sam might have been surprised to find in some of these emails that her dad and I don't agree on some things. She might not have known that for the same reason that we won't offer you direction going forward unless you ask. Though Rob and I are the best of friends it's not my place to argue with him in front of his kids, so I've never done it. I have respect for his leadership of his family whether I agree with him on a particular point or not. If he asks my opinion I'll share it or if he opens a conversation about a topic, I'll tell him what I think about it, especially if I think he's taking the wrong approach, but I would never do that if he didn't open the conversation, it's not my place. I have respect for his "house". Likewise I have respect for your house and your right to manage it. Rob and I have those discussions over coffee or at lunch and they're good conversations. We have fun talking about the things that we don't agree on, but discussing them in front of his kids isn't appropriate. Asking for advice shouldn't be hard. Rob and I have those conversations because he asks for my advice on things. I do the same with him. It's part of something that we've been trying to teach you and that is that having trusted advisers is key to making the right decisions. Sometimes all that's needed is to simply open a conversation about a topic and see where it leads. You might be surprised at the answers that you find doing this, but always remember... if all of

your advisers are "wrong", you just might be "wrong" too... :-) That said, sometimes most of your adviser's are wrong... that happens sometimes, and that's why people say life is hard.

Writing these emails has been an interesting experiment for us. As Tommy said on his blog yesterday, it has forced us to think about our love in more detail than ever before. We have explored new avenues of communication, and we have loved more deeply because of it. Seeing your pure and honest love over the last couple of weeks has helped to remind us of our own not so long ago. Thinking about the best way to keep a marriage healthy has reminded us of some of the things that we've been forgetting lately. Thank you for that opportunity. As we said, even you can be role models...

It's been a lot of fun for us, and we hope you've enjoyed them too. You are not our children, heck you're not even, really, related to us. But, if we did have children, and we could pick them... we'd want them to be a lot like the two of you (*err, except not married to each other... because that'd be weird... right?*).

We'll end this with a reminder from the very first email that we sent some 30 days ago. "All marriage advice is bullshit"... Do the best you can and follow God in all things. It will be enough.

All of our Love,
Tommy and Jodi

P.S.

Jacob goes back to work today. We'll miss him and wish we had had a chance to take you guys to dinner while he was here, but we understand that you've been a little busy. Thank you for including us in your beautiful wedding, it was a truly awesome day and a great addition to our end of year celebrations. Definitely, the next time you're in town let's plan a night out to catch up.

There will be tears to cry at your parting this morning... may they be the saddest tears you ever need cry.