

# Verbal Equinox

Weber State University Writing Center Journal

Spring/Summer 1998

## Awaken Your Writing Potential

Write! Write! Write!

**T**he Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference was hosted by WSU on March 6 and 7 of this year. This conference provided a great opportunity for tutors from five different states in the Mountain West to address issues and problems in writing centers and to discuss tips for tutoring more effectively. Dr. John Schwiebert delivered a very insightful keynote address for the conference, and he shared with us some helpful hints on how to awaken the potential writer within ourselves. The following suggestions are excerpts from Dr. Schwiebert's keynote address.

### 1. Think through your fingers (i.e., write).

One of the best ways you can rouse your individual potential is by writing, not just in the classroom but on your own and throughout your life. My own area of academic expertise is American literature, and study has shown me that some of the greatest figures in the American literary canon were largely self-taught writers:

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### What's Inside

- 10 tips for great poetry
- Keeping a journal: a personal thing
- Writing Center talent

## Sylvia Speaks ...

This issue of *Verbal Equinox* is a new beginning: it is the first issue we have put together since I became coordinator last year, and I hope it marks a renewed dedication to its semiannual publication.

Each of us has grown in many different ways this year, whether it was through conquering the punctuation pattern sheet, finding a really good way to explain a concept (parallelism, organization, fragmented sentences, etc.), discovering how to cite something in APA style, or making a new friend-fellow tutor or patron. We have come to recognize our own strengths- some new, some hidden-and, most important, the strengths of others.

Hosting the Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference proved to be my biggest challenge and, hence, learning experience, but the most growth came in starts and spurts, here and there throughout the year. I have learned many important lessons:

1. It's OK to say "I don't know."
2. It's OK to say, "Yes, I do know."
3. Grown-ups (non-traditional students) still need to be coddled.
4. It's OK to ask for help (not quite the same as #1).
5. Gentleness goes a long way in explaining *anything*.
6. Tutoring ESL students is never as scary as I think it will be.
7. I still have much more to learn.

Tutoring is an almost sacred experience. As I try to teach my students that they must revise, I tell them, "Writing a paper is like giving birth. We work very hard at it and once it's 'delivered', we gaze at it with wonder and awe. It is a thing of beauty, perfection. We don't want to change it one whit. However, we all know that, as perfect as newborn babies are, they have to be raised, taught and trained."

This is the challenge that we as tutors have: to help people do the most difficult thing- look at their "children" objectively. This is something I have seen our tutors do with grace, wit, and expertise. I applaud them; I am proud of them; I will miss them.

**SCHWIEB** *from page 1*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, though a graduate of Harvard, finished in the bottom half of his class and did most of his reading and writing on his own.

Walt Whitman quit school after finishing the equivalent of a fifth-grade education but continued to write on his own for the next sixty years.

Emily Dickinson attended prep school and only one year of college but kept on developing her writing by composing letters and poetry.

Eugene O'Neill flunked out of college and took only one one-semester class in how to write plays; but, thanks to his habit of writing on his own, twenty years later he was in Stockholm accepting a Nobel Prize for his playwriting.

The list of examples could go on ...None of this is meant to discredit formal education, (far from it; a few of these writers might have done even better if they had had more formal schooling); it is simply to show what you can do on your own when you're out of the classroom and out of school.

You can do what Walt Whitman did. He kept paper stuffed in his pockets so that he could be ready to write at any time.

If he was out walking, in his room, alone or in public, and he got an idea, or if he encountered something striking in a book or

newspaper, he jotted it down on a slip of paper. In the course of a day, he might collect two or three notes or one or two dozen. Quotations, observations, stray lines and thoughts ...

The more  
inconsequential ... or  
apparently "boring"  
the note, the more  
urgent it is to write it  
down.

At home he emptied the notes from his pockets and sorted related notes into envelopes- a different envelope for each embryonic poem. When he felt he had accumulated "enough" inside an envelope to make a poem, he emptied the contents onto his desk. ...Then, patiently, he moved the slips around, arranging them into order, pattern, sequence.

Whitman kept up this process of collecting, sorting, dumping, and arranging over weeks, months, and years. Collectively, the notes evolved into a book, *Leaves of Grass*. In its final edition, published in the poet's old age, *Leaves* contained over 350 poems. A life's work ...not bad. And it all grew out of simple notes on scraps of paper.

...Where would writers be without *pockets--or* knapsacks, or other places for carrying around paper? If someone had not invented these compact portable

drawers, I am certain that at least three-fourths of our literature would never have come into being. It's hard to imagine a person being a writer or, more generally, a *thinker*, without having someplace on his or her person for carrying paper. Why? Because good ideas, if not written down at once, are generally lost forever.

...The example of these creative people-novelists, poets, historians, composers, artists, scientists- might be summed up in [one] sentence: *Think through your fingers.*

Keep a pocket notepad for jotting down your passing thoughts, striking quotations (overheard of from reading or other sources), images, observations, arresting facts and ideas for writing.

The more inconsequential, idiosyncratic, or apparently "boring" the note, the more urgent it is to write it down. As Elias Canetti, a German Nobel laureate, once observed, "The best thoughts that come to us are initially alien and eerie, and one first has to forget them before one can even start to understand them."

Make a habit of regularly rereading your collected notes so that you can enjoy, expand, and/or revise them, or interlink one note with others ....

## 2. Read actively.

...As I describe this habit of reading actively, I am only pointing out what really good

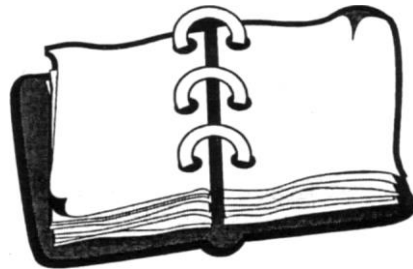
See **SCHWIEB** page 8

# 10 Tips for Great Poetry

Brad Roghaar has worked as a professor in the WSU English department for 14 years and has been teaching poetry for 16 years. He has written hundreds of poems and is published widely in several journals and magazines. He has published one book of poetry titled Unraveling the Knot and is just finishing up a second book titled Stand of Aspen: Places of Healing. He is also currently writing the script- a "cine-poem"- for a film on wild horses in Utah.

As if these projects weren't enough, he also serves on the editorial board for Rough Draft, is the faculty advisor for Metaphor, and is the associate editor for Weber Studies. Roghaar teaches a poetry writing class every quarter, and always has great advice for writing better, more effective poetry. The following is a list of his top ten tips for great poetry.

1. Use concrete images to describe abstract concepts- show rather than tell.
2. Avoid abstract nouns and tired verbs.
3. Delete- be willing to part with whole chunks of verse. Sometimes there are only five or ten lines of really good poetry in a whole page.
4. Don't mistake great emotions for great poetry.
5. Address universal themes or concepts through specific situations or examples- but don't really worry about the "big themes." They'll show up by themselves.
6. Makes sure the poem- with all of its parts- conveys a unified message.
7. Put a lot of "geography" (places) and "furniture" (things) in your poems- the more detail the better.
8. Dare to take chances.
9. Write a lot- let "happy accidents" happen.
10. But most of all, read a lot and read widely.



We can't learn to write; we keep on learning to write. -Donald Murray

## Keeping a personalized journal *by Ed Coombs*

Some people swear by an archival quality acid-free bound journal. Some people swear by the scrap-of-paper-in-my-pocket journal. I use a loose-leaf binder style of journal. But the best kind of journal, hands down, is the kind that you are going to use on a regular basis. It really doesn't matter what form it is in; what matters is using it on a regular basis. Whenever I travel, vacation, backpack, road trip, or go on an overnigher, I take a sheet of loose-leaf with me so I can keep current in my writing.

Keeping current is the key. The easiest way to kill a journal habit is to miss a day. When you are constantly playing catch-up with your writing, both you and your memories will suffer. Ideas and images of places and people become ghosts and shades in our dim memories, always lurking, but never coming out into the light. To keep this from happening, keep a piece of paper in your favorite book, wallet, purse, or whatever, but keep something to write on wherever you go.

The Grand Master of Science Fiction, Ray Bradbury, has been writing and publishing since before I was born. His secret to writing is to write every day. I think he knows something we don't. By writing every day, you keep the cerebral stream clear for ideas. These ideas pool into a reservoir that you can draw from.

I write in my journal every night. I can record thoughts and events that have occurred that day. Sometimes while I'm recording these things, new ideas jump out. Sometimes while I'm brushing my teeth, new ideas jump out. Sometimes when I'm about to fall asleep, new ideas jump out. The trick is to write it down, teeth or warm bed aside. I presented a paper at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference that started from an idea I had just before falling asleep one night. Sometimes, a book or a movie or an art piece might trigger a thought. Write in the margin of the book. Write on the movie stub. Write on the museum program. Never give up a good idea when it arises because you never know where it might go.

The most important thing to remember is to get a journal that works for you and keep with it.

## Five Haiku of Hawaii

1.  
Near the sea  
Prayer rocks stacked  
Atop each other

2.  
Saltwater stings  
Pineapple cuts  
On my ribs

3.  
Over Haleakala  
The sun rises  
Every day

4.  
Fruit fly and I  
Both here for  
Smell of guava

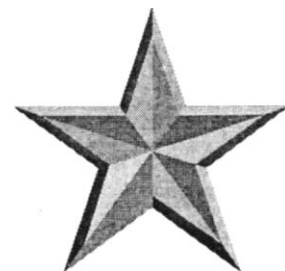
5.  
No mail today-  
Detached  
On the island

by Andrew Christensen

**Come to the  
Writing Center  
Open House!  
Fall Semester!**

- get some food
- meet some people

**Friday September 11, 1998  
10:30-1:30**



Visit the writing center web page at  
<http://catsis.weber.edu/learningsupport>

# Suicide

by Tom Purdue

The old man wrote his will on a pancake,  
                                syrup greasing into his eggs and bacon.  
For wearing your hats with a daisy in the brim,  
Claire,  
  
                                smelling optimistic and white like a god.  
For holding keys in the ventricles of my heart,  
                                threatening to unlock me like a clot.  
For pulling tassels of wax from my eardrums,  
                                strumming the tinnitus that dies there like yellow jackets.  
For suffering a painful man in your side,  
                                stabbing like my today at noon stinger  
  knife.

I leave you nothing.

But to the waitress,  
Who gave me that warm acid influx  
everyday of my withering  
waspy life.

I hope I leave you alone.  
Never to eye,  
your black pantyhose  
                tabasco  
                    dripping on orange tile  
                                hair like well-buttered toast.

Only ashes whistling beneath table thirty-two.

The old man sectioned off another bite of pancake/eggs/bacon/syrup/tabasco/ketchup  
and let his eye wander from her  
buttocks.

<This food's gonna kill me someday!>

(Amen) breathes the busboy letting his eye wander to her buttocks  
grimy heart thrown into dishwasher chest,

breaking plates and porcelain faces and the night and the promise.





## A cold night on a wooden bench- September 1995

by Gary Boyle

Many years ago and a lifetime away, I lived in the city of Los Angeles. Through a series of personal catastrophes and severe errors in judgement, I lost my job and home in a week. Quickly, I learned how difficult it is to get a job without a home and a home without a job.

I squatted in an apartment on Beverly Glenn for a short time, but I knew it would only be a temporary refuge. Swallowing another chunk of pride, I made my way to the Social Service building in West L.A. to get on board the welfare gravy train. It took two days of waiting inside the building for a social worker to see me and tell me to come back tomorrow. After I filled out triplicate forms of monotony, I was assigned to the shelter on Santa Monica and Vine, near West Hollywood.

I settled in, made a few acquaintances, played some cards and watched some TV. On the third day, a van pulled up and six young men entered the shelter. They had just been released from Folsom Prison, one of them for manslaughter. He had been pushed in South Central, and in retaliation had shot the poor sod seven times with a 9mm from two feet away.

I stood up to him once when he tried to take a cigarette out of my mouth. This impressed him, and we ended up standing in the soup lines together after that.

Three weeks after I arrived, my check for \$320 came in. With this money I was to find a place to live, eat, and transport myself for the next thirty days, at which time I would get \$280. If I got a job, all benefits would be rescinded. I was then told to leave the shelter because I had too much money.

I caught a bus on Sunset and headed for the beach. Occasionally, I would look at my check. I had no bank account and the issuing bank was in Pasadena, so there was no way for me to cash the check without going there. At the time, I could have as easily gone to the moon. With my stomach grumbling, I got off the bus at Santa Monica Beach. I spent my last nickel on gum and began to wander. People gave me dirty looks, and stores I once patronized told me to leave.

I decided to go to the library because it was warm and free. When I walked through the door, a security guard greeted me with an evil eye, and the lady behind the desk demanded to know exactly what I was going to do there. "Read," I said. She looked me up and down, and I could tell she was skeptical of my literacy abilities. "Do you have a library card?" she asked harshly. "You can't come in here without a library card." I opened my empty wallet and showed her my tattered paper library card. She looked disappointed. "We close in an hour. Then you'll have to leave."

I sat in that building reading, and whenever I put my head down on the table, a guard would appear and nudge me with a flashlight and say, "No sleeping here. Go outside if you want to sleep."

See GARY page 7

### Rural Struggle

or

"Lines on the way to Delta or  
Hinkley for Thanksgiving  
upon viewing a shot-up Deer  
Crossing sign"

by Ed Coombs

Ironic,  
I think it  
to see the signs  
at the side of the road  
on our route to Delta,  
or Hinkley  
all shot up.

But to be specific  
The Deer Crossings  
were the greatest casualties.  
Buckshot  
Gunshot  
Small bore  
Large bore  
from a 4x4.

Isaw one sign  
unmarred, unmolested.  
A Farmer Crossing  
without a wound.

Perhaps one day  
an antler  
will puncture  
the posted effigy  
of their  
Rural adversary.

**GARY** *from page 6*

When the library closed I was back on the road. I tried to find a place to sleep in a parking lot, but the bicycle police chased me away. I hit the street and began to look for a place to succumb to exhaustion. In the parks, every square inch was occupied.. I walked along Santa Monica Boulevard with no place to go and all night to get there.

As a brand new wave of depression set in, a car began to follow me, coming up from behind with the brights on and then passing me over and over again. After about a half an hour of this, I began to get spooked. I jumped some fences, cut some alleys, and I finally found myself on a bench in front of the gas company. I used my bag as a pillow, wrapped up in my overcoat, and then fell asleep. As I lay there in a state of rest,

I felt the presence of somebody watching me. I looked across my feet perched on the arm rest of the bench, and there stood some guy in a bathrobe. I'm not sure what he was doing, but when he saw I was awake he went away. "Great," I muttered. "What can happen next?" It is often at a time like

this that a person can convince themselves that the situation can not get worse. This is a lie because it can always get worse.

I wrestled myself back into slumber only to be awakened by a tugging at my feet. I looked down

and saw a man trying to pull my shoes off. "Oh," he said. "I thought you were asleep." Then the man let go of my foot and walked away.

I got up and started out for my Aunt Norma's house in Brentwood, determined to at least take a shower and brush my teeth. When I walked into her kitchen she handed me the phone. On the other end was my dad. He told me to come home. I had not told anyone how bad off I was because I did not want to worry them, so I am still not sure how he found out I was homeless.

My dad gave me no long speech when I got to Ogden, just a hot meal and a warm shoulder. He passed no judgement on me. He just saved my life and left it at that. My dad passed away the Monday before school started. And every day since seems like a

cold night on a wooden bench.

**As a writer  
reading, I came  
to realize the  
obvious: the  
subject of the  
dream is the  
dreamer.**

**-Toni Morrison**

**Learning**

*by Tom Purdue*

The weight of the small desk  
Picked up by strong hands of  
my second grade teacher  
then thrown down to the floor.

The red of her tonsils  
darkens inside her throat  
sinew of face muscle  
chewing into my shame.

The weight of the papers  
infinite incomplete  
assignments stuffed in there  
some times tables worksheets  
and eraser spaceships  
football cards and pencils  
the meaningless papers.

The class glows different  
views of me – some mocking  
then some in empathy  
stupidity in trip  
to the after bathroom  
realize my company  
aside urinal smells  
rough brown paper napkins  
wiping tears of knowledge.

My hidden world lies in  
that room on the floor where  
I can lash back at them.

The pen in hands write  
one small night to complete  
all the laughing at all  
their insignificance  
laughing at her and her  
perfect sense and courage

dumping my innocence.

## SCHWIEB<sub>from page 2</sub>

writers-the ones we study in English and other classes-have been doing for hundreds of years: annotating, talking back to what they read, using the writings of others to start their own imaginations.

...[When] William Blake, eighteenth century poet and painter and a precursor of English Romanticism, ...read a book by Sir Joshua Reynolds, chief spokesman of a more conservative classical art tradition, Blake didn't just glance aimlessly over the pages; he wrote; he wrote up, in a mass of annotations, his own theory of art. Many of the notes Blake jotted down in reaction to Reynolds also showed up later as lines in his published poems.

... With our college training, most of us ...are probably less accustomed to reading in order to create than we are to reading in order to analyze: We read *Hamlet*

to analyze it; read *Moby Dick* to interpret Melville's symbolism; read Emily Dickinson in order to explicate her metaphors. All good exercise to a point, but incomplete without this other-reading to get yourself writing: as Shakespeare did, and Emerson, and Melville, and Dickinson, and countless other writers through time.

Here are some practical steps you can take for reading to help yourself write:

1. Copy out passages from your reading that move you.
2. Annotate. Record your intuitive first reactions in the margins or a notebook.
3. Use the annotations that stir you the most as launching-off points for your own writing.
4. When you write from reading, experiment with composing in diverse forms-dialogues, letters, journal entries, stories, poems, etc.
5. Again, regularly reread what you have written so that you can enjoy, expand, or revise

it, or connect one idea with others.

### 3. Concentrate your energies.

"The one good," wrote Emerson, "is concentration. The one evil is dissipation." ... A [good]' illustration of Emerson's words might be his contemporary, Emily Dickinson.

Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, a town that frowned on women writing "intellectual" poetry of the sort *she* composed. Her father believed that, for a woman, intellectual life should stop at the end of college to be replaced by a life of docile servitude to the male head of the household. Her mother was withdrawn and sickly, and in later years, required constant attention from her daughter. Though assisted by servants and a sister, Emily had responsibilities for baking and gardening. In addition, she was expected to fulfill other "female" duties such as watching over sick and dying neighbors and relatives (whose numbers sometimes seemed epidemic).

It was not just the demands on her time that threatened to dissipate her energy; it was also what she lacked: chiefly, any significant encouragement to write poetry. During her lifetime hardly anyone knew who Emily Dickinson *was*; those who met her had no idea they were encountering one of the two or three greatest poets in the American literary canon. Only a dozen of her poems were published before her death, and those few

See SCHWIEB page 9

## Upon Returning to My Grandparents' House, Which is No Longer Theirs

by Megan Hansen

This used to be my Papa's and my Grandmama's house.

I can peak over the side of the cement fence, smell the lemon tree still standing there,  
outside the red door that leads to the kitchen and the sun catchers.  
The citrus tree and the humidity heat the air yellow.

I can tell though, even from here, that my Uncle Greg's marijuana plants are gone from the roof.  
It's just as well, he's a Baptist now.



**SCHWIEB** *from pages*

individuals who read and admired her work generally pronounced it flawed and *amateurish*. In this context, her concentration is perhaps the single most remarkable fact of her life. Living in circumstances that could have scattered the energies of lesser person, she stuck passionately to her task and wrote, in a span of three decades, some 1800 poems that delineate (like no others) the landscape of the human soul.

How would Emily Dickinson have fared in the 1990s? Clearly, as a woman she would have more opportunities available to her now than she did a century ago; but as a poet she would have faced an exponentially greater number of temptations to distraction: telephone, radio, TV, cable and satellite, FAXes and cell phones, the Internet, videos, shopping malls, the means and the incentives to be a hundred different places quickly or instantaneously, physically or virtually ... all good things in themselves; but they complicate the question of how to spend our time. Today we are no longer asking, "Should I do A or B?" (as Emily Dickinson might have) but "Should I do A, B, C, D, E, F, etc. etc. or Z?" And the proliferating choices and opportunities mean that we must learn to say "NO" about twenty times more often than Emily Dickinson ever had to.

I suspect that one secret to concentration may be slowing down. I once read about a poet (I've forgotten his name) who never let himself walk at a faster

"The one good is concentration. The one evil is dissipation."

pace than two mph; he claimed that the slow pace shuffled the accumulated junk and detritus from his mind and got him focusing ....

#### 4. Blunder Boldly.

In the 1840s Sarah Margaret Fuller, another Massachusetts woman and a contemporary of Emily Dickinson, organized what she called "conversation groups." The conversation groups were a precursor of our modern-day reading and writing groups, and they held meetings in the city of Boston to discuss various topics of the day: literature, fine arts, nature, history, religious and civil institutions, the lives of great men and women. It happened that some of those who participated in these meetings wanted to attend without speaking. In a letter to one of her collaborators, Fuller expressed concern: "No one will be forced [to speak]; but those who do not talk will not derive the same advantages with those who openly state their

impressions and consent to learn by blundering as is the destiny of Man here below."

Is there any three-word phrase that sums up *better* the process of self-realization? *Learn by blundering!* It reminds me of a similar statement by the late Miles Davis, jazz trumpeter: "Do not fear mistakes. There are none." In other words, mistakes only *exist* for those who fear them.

Miles Davis was one of the great masters of modern jazz. In 1986 he was interviewed for a book on jazz history. All through the interview, as he was listening and conversing, [Davis] was also drawing (he was a visual artist as well as a musician)-sketching, crossing out and adding, modifying-totally relaxed and cool, talking and drawing at the same time.

Davis put a lot of marks on paper during that interview in order to get just the "right" marks he wanted. Hundreds of lines to get the right line ... Imagine if he had stopped himself after sketching in each line and asked, "Is this good?" or remarked (jabbing his pen into the paper), "This sucks!!!" The whole process would have stopped dead. No: Miles Davis, not believing in the existence of mistakes, remained calmly neutral about each mark he made on the page, working away, trying this and trying that; and when he had what he wanted, *then* he stopped.

The quality that was strong in Miles Davis, and common to all

See **SCHWIEB** page 10

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**SCHWIEB***from page 9*


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of the people I have mentioned, is the ability to suspend critical judgment. Remember Whitman, remember [William Blake], remember Emily Dickinson: all were brave and free enough to do the "stupid" and the "obvious," secure in the knowledge that they would recognize quality when they produced it.

Let me leave you with this thought: The best way to awaken your [writing] potential is by honoring your "boring" and "stupid" thoughts: write them down; don't judge them; because the way to good thinking (and writing) is not *around* or *over* these so-called boring and stupid ideas but *through* them.

Finally, I have been using as examples people we think of as "geniuses." Let me stress that my message is emphatically *not* become a genius; most of us probably don't aspire to be geniuses and those of us who do should think twice: though they don't all die in garrets or gutters, people of genius are typically tormented, and it is probably more fun to see one than be one.

My point, rather, is that we ought to take the best of the good that geniuses have—namely, a life rich in soul and imagination; a life that sees, tastes, touches, and hears, that is fully awake, alive to its own potential.

**Elysium**

for Brian

*by Megan Hansen*

I

I always knew you were there  
Half your heart hidden in shadow  
Mouth behind slices of paper  
Whispering through winds and novas

II

The water curls my feet and down  
I catch light in my hands.  
Reflection changes, fires the sky.  
I feel elements etch my eyes.

III

You find me in yellow prairie,  
paintbrush and damp moss curve my neck.  
Sage rain and bitter mesquite rub my belly.  
Our howls shake the moon.

**The Lazarus Bale***by Ed Coombs*

Rainy, misty mid-morning  
Heavy clouds relax on the foothills.  
Loud gulls float down  
Through the damp atmosphere  
and discuss the morning's finds.  
The air smells of worms  
driven up by the showers.

I see a bale of straw  
mildewed and bent  
sitting on a silty wash.  
The bale has sprouted grass  
green whiskers thriving  
on the lifeless thatch face.

*Poetry is the  
journal of a sea  
animal living on  
land, wanting to  
fly in the air.*

*--Carl Sandburg***ME:**

A Declaration  
of Femininity

*by KAT Mitchell*

I am a woman.  
I spit.  
Ifart.  
I burp.

I am too emotional.

I can see more than  
there is.  
I read too much  
into my salad.

I hate, love, cry,  
laugh, sleep, and  
pee.

I am a woman.

This issue of Verbal Equinox  
has been brought to you by the  
sincere efforts of the staff.

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Graphics, patience, morale...