

The Orme School
Commencement Address 2019
By William C. “Billy” Cordasco ‘80

Your Orme Essence: Excellence, Tradition, Character

Good morning Orme School, faculty members, distinguished guests, parents . . . and Class of 2019!
I am deeply humbled and gratefully honored to be here today.

Orme is a wonderful and meaningful part of my heart, and I am so thankful, and I feel so blessed for all of my experiences while attending Orme, and for the relationships that I continue to have with the Orme Community.

Nearly 40 years ago, I was sitting where you are today, reflecting on all that Orme had meant to me: the excellent education, sporting activities, Caravan, Fine Arts Festival, Fall Outing weekends and many other special times – like the lighting of the Candle Star in the Chapel at Christmas with each one of us lighting our own individual candle – and the amazing natural beauty all around. There is nothing like an Orme Ranch sunset.

I remember the mix of emotions going on inside of me. I was certainly beaming with pride to be receiving my diploma, and feeling so accomplished for successfully rising to the challenges of high school, maybe just a little anxious about stepping out of the safe haven of the Orme Community – what had been my home and family for four years.

I also remember the precious dark skies of Orme... walking from the barnyard to my dorm room after study hall... looking up and seeing all those stars overhead for as far as I could see... appreciating the immenseness of it all... the mysteries and wonders of the universe.

Do you know, nearly 80 percent of the people in this country can't see the Milky Way from where they live because of the lights from our big cities? I believe our dark night skies inspire us, spark our imagination, offer a window into the universe AND our place in it.

The three stars that make up Orion's Belt are especially bright out here. I encourage you some evening in the near future, to find Orion's Belt in the night sky and look just below it. You will see a fuzzy cloud of faint twinkling lights. That is the Great Nebula in Orion. It's a cosmic nursery where young stars are developing, feeling their energy, gaining their strength. You can think of Orme as a star nursery, too. Those of you graduating here today have everything you need to go out into the world and be stellar individuals. YOU have been developing, like those young stars, in that nebula. YOU have been absorbing all the elements that will make you shine.

Graduates, after your experience here at Orme, I want you to consider yourselves as having all the ingredients you need, for possibility and greatness just like those stars forming above you.
Let's call these ingredients **Orme Essence**.

I think of the many, many great leaders, people who have had close ties to The Orme School. They have been inspired, shaped and enriched by paying attention to **Excellence, Tradition and Character** – all that is Orme.

Orme has taught me many things, but I am most grateful for what it has instilled in me, the gift of **Orme Essence**, the ingredients for Possibility and Greatness.

Interestingly, **Orme Essence** was first articulated and defined in part by Charlie Orme. For example:

-) The development of sound character, strong personality and inner resourcefulness;
-) Personal growth in the qualities of simple honesty, truthfulness and integrity in our everyday lives;
-) A dedication to the development of self-confidence and self-identity.

I had become aware of these traits that strengthen and build sound character: honesty, integrity, the satisfaction that comes from hard work, and appreciating nature. Orme taught me how to reach – to really stretch – for Possibility and Greatness.

I'm reminded of an opportunity to rappel off a cliff on one of our Orme School Fall Outings. The thought of being suspended in the air, dangling from a harness and ropes, high above solid ground was just too much for me. I saw everyone else doing it, but I could not understand what was holding me back. I opted out.

And that frustrated me. For a YEAR! I felt like I let my instructors down. But worse, I let myself down. The next year, that rappelling off a cliff opportunity rolled around again. After thinking about it for so long, I realized I was still apprehensive! Still a bit afraid. But my feelings of determination, and faith were stronger. I had more trust in the gear and the rope handlers, and more confidence in myself. This time, I did rappel over the cliff, and I could feel the possibility, the trust, the confidence in myself growing!

Through this experience and many others, my Orme instructors were teaching me about these characteristics, these ingredients of Orme Essence – how to be at your best mentally and physically when nothing else will do. And how to push through the doubt, concerns and fear, and accomplish goals that may have seemed scary or unconquerable at first.

Maybe you, too, can think of a time when your Orme instructors helped you stretch farther than you had before, for a chance at Possibility and Greatness.

All of these characteristics – self-confidence, faith, resourcefulness, hard-work, honesty and trust -- they were developed in me, here at Orme. I may not have been able, to state them as clearly as Charlie Orme did at the time, but I felt them deep down inside. I also didn't know how important that foundation, that core, that **Orme Essence** would be throughout my life.

I'd like you all to take a moment and dig deep. What's at your core? What is in your heart? If you lost everything. If you woke up tomorrow and the world as you know it was completely different, what would you be left with? I suggest it's your **Orme Essence**.

I want to share a story with you today about a young man, an Orme graduate, whose world had completely changed not once, but several times throughout his life, and the first major shift for him happened while he was at Orme.

Circumstances beyond his control had rocked him to his very core. It was at those times that he had to go really deep inside himself, deeper than he'd ever gone before to remember:

-) Who he was;
-) And what he was made of;
-) To regain his strength; and,
-) Find his path.

This young man had lost his mother to cancer while he was away at school. Meanwhile, his father had moved all the way to the other side of the country, and took his three younger brothers with him. While his friends were reuniting with their parents and family members on that special graduation day, seeing the love and pride in their eyes, the smiles on their faces and celebrating this great accomplishment together, he felt a bit hollow, a bit empty.

His parents were not in the audience. He would not be celebrating with them that day, or really ever. He would not be excitedly sharing ideas about his future with them. And he would not be going back to the childhood home he knew after Commencement.

This quiet, introspective young man felt the weight of the unknown, and the inevitable transition from life in the Orme Community. There was so much uncertainty. He felt he had lost his foundation, his closest and strongest support.

He was accepted into a college, but his heart wasn't into it. He didn't really even attend classes his first semester. His uncertain world had distracted him from his studies and his future. This Orme graduate failed his classes during the very first semester at college. All he wanted was to go home. It felt like he was a ship at sea, being tossed by the waves with no rudder to steer him, no compass for direction.

This young man went to his grandparents' home in Flagstaff, Arizona, and got a job in the family business at a lumberyard loading trucks and sweeping floors. At this point, he had decided this entry-level position was to be his destiny. He didn't feel the need or expectation to stretch himself any further. He had forgotten his **Orme Essence**.

Then one day, a very successful uncle called him up out of the blue and invited him to lunch. He spoke to him in a way no one had in a very long time, not since he was at Orme. He told this young man that people were counting on him.

That uncle said to him, "This big family business is going to need a new leader one day, and you could find yourself as president of this organization. To be president, you're going to need a college education."

That young man left the meeting thinking, Wow, someone truly believed in him. Somebody well-respected and successful had taken the time to remind him of what he was made of, like so many wonderful people had done for him at The Orme School.

As he reflected on that lunch, that young man started to think of himself as a leader. He chewed on that thought for a while. He imagined himself not as being content at the entry level – at the bottom rung of the organizational ladder – but as someone who could stretch, really reach for the top. The very top, and be the leader.

The thought was overwhelming. It took his breath away. It filled his stomach with butterflies, and he liked it. It felt exciting. It felt right.

That uncle spoke Possibility and Greatness into this young man, as he remembered so many others had done for him at Orme. His uncle saw in him **Orme Essence**. It stirred something deep in his soul. He was reminded of who he was, an Orme graduate, someone in whom the wonderful people at Orme had poured the ingredients of **Orme Essence: Excellence, Tradition, Character**.

Two weeks later, that young man was enrolled at Northern Arizona University. Each semester, proud of his grades, he couldn't wait to call his uncle and report the good news.

Today, I'm thrilled to tell you that young man is indeed president of the large family business that his uncle was talking about. When he called on that **Orme Essence** deep inside, it was powerful, and others felt it too.

Throughout his career, governors – who recognized his attention to **Excellence** – called on him to lead committees and do important work that would shape Arizona's future.

Tradition revealed itself in a connection to nature and land stewardship that he felt so strongly here at Orme and that he discovered when he reflected on his own family traditions. This young man saw how his passion for conservation and land use ethics – forged by the Orme landscape – changed the way open wild land would be cared for on nearly a million acres in Northern Arizona.

The **Character** qualities that he developed at Orme were about honesty, enthusiasm, confidence, responsibility, integrity, respect, accountability, faith, ambition and hard work. And, above all else, the value of relationships.

That **Orme Essence**, which the young man had forgotten about for a little while, made it possible for him to have an impact on his family, his community, his state, his region and beyond. In his career, that young man has been honored with national awards in Wildlife Conservation and Land Management. He was inducted into the Arizona Hall of Fame and even appointed to the prestigious Board of Trustees at The Orme School!

That young man is not so young anymore, but he continues to strive to put forth that **Orme Essence** in everything he does – constantly reaching for Possibility and Greatness. This young man that I've been telling you about, well, he is so incredibly grateful to the Orme Community. And, he is speaking to you right now.

My message to you, is to find **your Orme Essence**, hold onto it with all your might, even tighter, when times are tough. Life will challenge you, even surprise you and demand more than you think you can do like rappelling over a cliff at Orme. People may misunderstand you. Circumstances could seem unfair. And there will be times, when you feel uncertain, insecure, or a bit lost.

How about this? Later, after you celebrate all of your extraordinary Orme accomplishments on this wonderful Commencement day, take a few moments. Write down the **Excellence, Tradition and Character that make up your Orme Essence**, that which makes you you deep down.

-) Is it your respect for others that makes you such a great team member?
-) Is it your loyalty that makes you a trusted and dependable friend?
-) Is it your faith that assures you things will work out the way they are supposed to?

Of course, you'll find **Orme Essence** here in abundance. But you'll be reminded of it everywhere in wonderful examples demonstrated in teachers, firefighters, business professionals, flight attendants, physicians, athletes, scientists and family members at home. Every time you see people being their best and doing amazing things, you will be witnessing **Orme Essence**.

So, take that list, put it somewhere safe, and years from now pull it out and re-read it. Really feel those character qualities that are individually you. Through tough times and good times, they will help you remember:

-) Who you are;
-) All the Possibility and Greatness you have inside; and
-) That you have an important place and an important role to fill in the Universe.
-) What you do with that gift, that extraordinary gift, that **Orme Essence**, matters.

For me, I'm always reminded, that life is never about things, it's about relationships. And in the end, Relationships are all there is.

So, soon, I encourage you to look at that nebula - remember? That Great Nebula, in Orion's Belt in the night sky? Think of all those developing stars that have everything they need to shine bright, in that place reserved just for them in the Universe.

You, Class of 2019, you are stars in the making. You are made up of **Orme Essence**. And no matter what life throws your way, REMEMBER:

-) Who you are;
-) Where you come from;
-) What you're made of – Your Excellence, Your Traditions, Your Character – and you will find your place in the Universe.

Now, go out there and Shine! Congratulations!