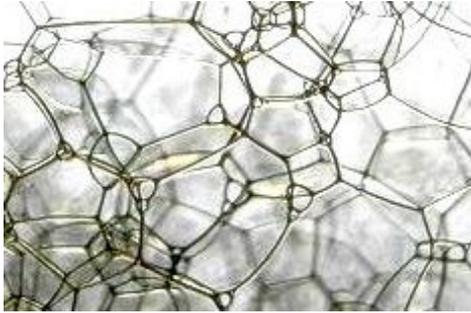


## A creative form to catch the spirit of Common Field



*Anne Focke  
August 18, 2017*

Is it possible to find a creative form for Common Field – one that is continually renewed by a restless desire for something always alive and always better?

Common Field has a brand-new, very practical legal form. It is now a 501(c)(3) organization. This and other practical structures being created by Common Field's council, board, and staff will allow the network to operate in the world as it is today. I'm a proud member of Common Field's council and of the governance team charged with overseeing the process of creating this legal form.

At some point, though, it struck me that legal forms are only one kind of structure that a group of people might create to work together. A second, complementary, and probably necessary, form would take advantage of the imagination that we bring to it as artists.

The words of artists helped me come to this conclusion. One source is a book of essays by Wendell Berry that, coincidentally, I began reading while attending a NAAO conference years ago (mid-1980s, I think, at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago). In one essay, "People, Land, and Community," Berry describes the faulty assumption that we can ever become smart enough to control the "demons at large." He wrote:

*The evidence is overwhelming that knowledge does not solve the "human problem."*

For our purposes here, I'd replace "knowledge" with facts or rules or legalities. A little later Berry says, "It is simply true that we do not and cannot *know* enough to make any important decision." He applies this to marriage, farming, and community. I suspect that, for Common Field, it's also true that, to clumsily paraphrase him, "No legal form can ever solve our human problem." What I take from this is that, as hard as it is to make a decision the first time, the real work of making it a *good* decision comes after that, in continuing to understand and adapt it and to make the decision work in the real world.

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Then, in another essay, "Poetry and Marriage," which is more explicitly about form, Berry wrote this:

*Properly used, a verse form, like a marriage, creates impasses, which the will and present understanding can solve only arbitrarily and superficially. These halts and difficulties are, perhaps, the true occasions of the poem: occasions for surpassing what we know or have reason to expect... One puts down the first line of the pattern in trust that life and language are abundant enough to complete it.*

Maybe that's what we're doing now, writing the first line of Common Field's pattern. And we have to trust that life and our actions together are abundant enough to fill out the pattern that we begin.

This same essay includes other memorable sentences: "It may be, then, that form serves us best when it works as an obstruction to baffle us and deflect our intended course." And another... "The impeded stream is the one that sings."

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A nice follow-on to Berry comes from Martha Graham in an exchange that Agnes de Mille recorded in her memoir, *Dance to the Piper*. De Mille wrote:

*The greatest thing [Martha] ever said to me was in 1943 after the opening of Oklahoma!, when I suddenly had unexpected flamboyant success for a work I thought was only fairly good, after years of neglect for work I thought was fine. I was bewildered and worried that my entire scale of values was untrustworthy....*

*I said, "When I see my work I take for granted what other people value in it. I see only its ineptitude, inorganic flaws, and crudities. I am not pleased or satisfied."*

*"No artist is pleased."*

*"But then is there no satisfaction?"*

*"No satisfaction whatever at any time," she cried out passionately.*

*"There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and more alive than the others."*

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All this is meant to offer an expanded context for developing the legal documents, while maybe removing some of the pressure to get them exactly right. And it sets up a question: In addition to putting in place the legal framework that Common Field needs simply to work in the world today, can we approach Common Field as a creative form? Can we create a larger form — that is, beyond the legal structure — a form begun and periodically renewed by a restless desire for something always alive

and always better, a container for imagination and aspirations held together by commitment and trust that can take us past the obstructions that baffle us now and through the many obstacles that will undoubtedly baffle us in the future?

The kind of form I'm imagining needs more than legal bonds to hold it together, to release all the possibility inherent in this field. To my mind, the legalities are secondary to the real form we need. Perhaps we can create an image or an action or a text that Common Field could re-stage or renew at its annual convening every year, a kind of ritual maybe. Perhaps it could begin at the convening this year, perhaps with something really simple that could be continually adapted over time.

One example, though I'm not suggesting it for Common Field, comes from a 1980s conference about "creative support for creative artists" that closed with a piece by composer/performer Pauline Oliveros. In a bright dining room at lunch time (that is, no soft lights, no candles), Pauline directed us in humming together in an easy-to-follow pattern. That simple act, in unison, seemed to set us up to leave the conference with a larger sense of ourselves as a whole. The experience stays with me still.

The culture we live in today, even more than in Graham and de Mille's or even Berry's time, is caught up in, or to my mind trapped by, "metrics," measurements, and the rational. It's easy to forget that that's only one aspect of being human, only one side of what defines our relationships with each other. It would be amazing if, over time, Common Field could find a way to express its non-rational form. It would go a long way to helping it be the singing stream in Berry's essay.

## Notes

1. The full statement of Common Field's "Core Values" can be found at: [commonfield.org/about](http://commonfield.org/about).
2. *Standing by Words: Essays by Wendell Berry*, North Point Press, 1983.
3. NAAO, or the National Association of Artists' Organizations, was founded in 1982 and held its last conference in 2000 in Brooklyn, NY. It served many of the same purposes that Common Field has been formed to meet.

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String Tales are part of the Jini Dellaccio Project, a sponsored project of Artist Trust.

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String Tales 7, Anne Focke 2017  
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