

IN CONVERSATION WITH Jayn Sterland

NINA DE WINTER

How Weleda are taking the founding impulse into the next 100 years

Picture credits: Elly Lucas

I had the privilege of interviewing Jayn Sterland, Weleda's CEO, to find out how they are celebrating their centenary. But, as all good conversations do, we meandered into interesting discussions about the future and tapping into the essence of the Anthroposophical movement.

"So I'll start by saying that Weleda being 100 years old, for me, is just incredible. It's a real privilege to work for a company that not only has a hundred years of history but is also about the continuation of our philosophy.

I would really love to think that if Steiner and Ita Wegman, our two founders, came back today, they would recognise the product, recognise the process and recognise how we farm. Not just in terms of farming biodynamically on our own land but also through partnerships around the world.

All of that makes it a privilege to front a brand, that I believe, has real integrity. The big question for me then is how do we take the founding impulse, the real essence into the next hundred years?"

To mark their 100 years and show how Weleda in the UK are really going to celebrate this, they have partnered with Tree Sisters. This charity organisation works with a number of projects around the world, planting trees in temperate and equatorial regions where they are really going to make the best impact. Founded by Claire Dubois, they planted 15 million trees since their founding.

Jayn says *"Steiner was such a visionary in recognising that we have to work in harmony at eye level with nature and the one big thing that is facing us all is the carbon challenge. We know soils are poisoned, water is poisoned but carbon is one of the big impact issues we need to fix."*

For her, Weleda is about two things. First, it is a place for human development and secondly it is combining this with practical spirituality. How to bring the intangible into the tangible. How they can do something really practical in real life that has an impact and makes a difference. So instead of just planting trees, they wanted to make sure they are working in a way that makes sense, hence the link with Tree Sisters, who not only plant trees but are thinking about their relationship with the earth, with spirituality and with women. They provide tools and support for local women to tend the trees and so the trees also have guardians, a kind of stewardship.

Unlike other commercial tree planting projects that use drones to plant, there is a guarantee if the tree dies it will be replanted, there is a human connection. The magic that comes from working in harmony, together, at eye level is reflective of the whole essence of biodynamics; We're not Masters of nature. We are in partnership with nature.

This is a theme that is also top of mind for Jayn in her work at Weleda, knowing that they have been pathfinders in the industry and inspired many other brands, she is conscious of how much more work needs to be done to show that you can work in harmony with nature and the whole human being. This sees Weleda working in collaboration with their industry by taking this initiative out into their world through retailers and sustainability promotions.

More than just planting a forest for the 100 years, Jayn hopes consumers will really start to think about their behaviour and to challenge some of the norms in the beauty industry. Do we need promotions to make us buy more? Or do we stop and think and be conscious and responsible citizens. That would be a more fitting hundred year legacy.

Other initiatives they are undertaking for their 100 year anniversary include a virtual open garden. They have spent a whole year filming and storytelling about the gardens. From the insects to biodiversity and also what is happening in the soil. Knowing how hard it is to connect to nature, especially under the circumstances of the last year, they were trying to build a bridge for us to connect to

Nature is incredible. She's strong and violent and quite frankly, she could do quite well without us.

nature, by sharing some of the stories and inspiration and talking about how you can get out into nature.

The importance of a hundred years and the impact it has, is close to Jayn's heart and she has certainly seen the impact Weleda has had in the 13 years she has been with the company. Their philosophy is in fact very modern and they strive to make it really tangible. In this vein, thinking of sustainability is very important and leads Jayn to explain that she sees nature as being viewed through three lenses.

"The first lens is the old paradigm, which is nature is a resource for us to use. The second paradigm is the sustainability paradigm, which is where we as a society are now: nature is really precious. We need to conserve nature. We need to protect nature. But that's very paternalistic. It has created an understanding that is very black and white. A 'this is good and this is bad' approach.

The paradigm that Weleda works in, is a regenerative paradigm that understands it's '50 shades of green' and is far more nuanced. We know that we are in partnership with nature. It's not paternalistic at all. Nature is incredible. She's strong and violent and quite frankly, she could do quite well without us."

She also goes on to add that with biodynamics *"we absolutely work at eye level because we know that nature does all the work. We activate the work, with our intentions, with our preps, with our timings and our understanding."*

This led us to a discussion about 'essence' as an important aspect of the remedies in Weleda products. The process of transforming plants into remedies and how this links into the biodynamic movement, potentially what we could learn from Weleda?

"As a manufacturing company, and that's what Weleda is, we're farmers and we're manufacturers, everything that we've learned through manufacturing you see in Biodynamics because we come from the same place."

She goes on to explain that Weleda came out of Steiner's lectures to farmers and his work with doctors.

These principles are all the same in terms of transformation. Taking the essence, and transforming it through how you work, into something that's tangible and can be used.

"If you think about Biodynamic preparations, it's the potentising, it's the stirring, it's the chaos that you create that puts the memory into the water. It's the amplification of the preparations that go into the compost heap. It's the amplification through the cow horns.

We take that concept and apply it in manufacturing, but, we think about the reflection back into the human body. For example, some of the products that we make for digestion actually undergo a digestion process themselves, kept at body temperature, as part of the processing."

50% of the magic of our products comes from how we grow the plants, but 50% comes from how we then activate the plant-based ingredients.

In short, it's the alchemical process of taking the goodness that comes out of plants and making it possible for the body to absorb. Active pharmaceuticals, is the scientific term. Using plant based ingredients and minerals is what makes Weleda quite unique and follows Steiner's same principles for biodynamics.

It's also important to understand it's the combination of the person and the process that makes the medicine. Even though their medicines are produced under very sterile conditions, they potentise in relation to the heartbeat of the person working with the remedy, just as you would, stirring preparations. It is 100% concentration, almost meditative.

The bridge of understanding between science and the anthroposophical approach is also widening. The 'picture of health' that plant based ingredients show the body, is gradually being recognised by science, in understanding that there are several 'actives' in remedies that are good. Much in the same way soil science is catching up to how we build fertility in the soil through bacteria. So the 'magic' is now gaining a scientific basis.

"So, as with biodynamic farming, 50% of the magic of our products comes from how we grow the plants, but 50% comes from how we then activate the plant-based ingredients in a way that the body can receive them."

Discussing further what the biodynamic movement could learn from Weleda, Jayn spoke of her impressions when she first arrived at Weleda all those years ago. Having come from the conventional beauty industry and very much connected to communication into the world, she found that the company had become quite introspective and perhaps slightly afraid of telling their story, because it's unusual.

Now coming up to the hundred year anniversary of the whole movement, what she would like to see most, is for us all in this movement to be brave and have the courage to take this message out into the world, but do it in a modern way. Steiner himself said that he worked with doctors because he wanted to share his knowledge with the world. It is what he did with his lectures to farmers, and told them to take it out into the world and work with it.



Sharing this message, keeping it alive and not overcomplicating it, is the most impactful thing we can do. It is as relevant today as it was a hundred years ago, but perhaps we have over intellectualised it? And now, more than ever we need to connect to the essence of anthroposophy and share it as wide as we can.

Find out more about;
Tree Sisters – **https://treesisters.org/**
Weleda's 100 Years – **www.weleda.co.uk/100-years**