



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO

# Sugpiaq Weaving

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Taught by June Pardue compiled by Chugachmiut Heritage Preservation Archive





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# SPECIAL Quyanaa



## TO THE ARTISTS

In the fall of 2022, a group of Chugachmiut elders came together to learn the endangered practice of Sugpiaq weaving from master weaver June Pardue. Their cultural revitalization efforts were inspiring, and the knowledge and stories they shared will enrich our communities for generations to come.

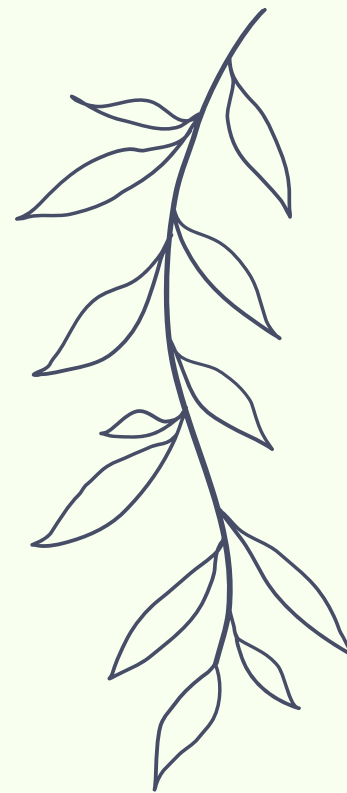
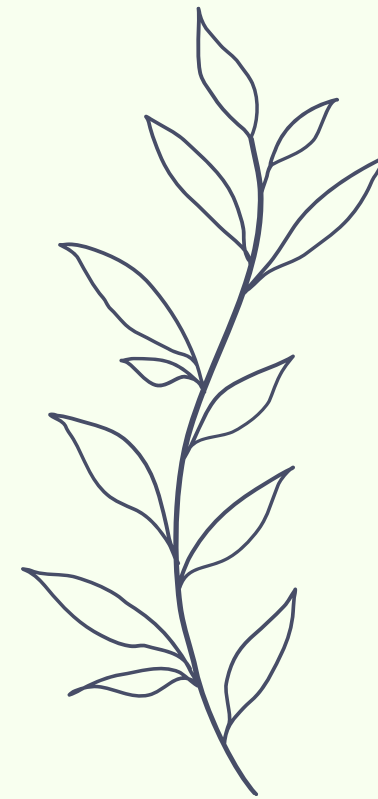
**Quyanakcak!**

(L to R) Sally Ash, June Pardue, Colette Brantingham, Susan LaBelle



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"Today there is a revival taking place all over the state of Alaska with Natives helping Natives, and it's not just one culture helping their culture, it's other cultures. We're embracing one another and learning together."

- *June Pardue*



# The Sugpiaq Weave

## *Chugach Style*

Sugpiaq people throughout history have had a deep connection to the natural world. We respected the resources that were found in our environment and integrated use of them into our lifestyle.

Weaving was developed by utilizing the beach grass and spruce roots that grow plentifully throughout the Chugach region.

Sugpiaq people have used weaving for everything from storage materials, cooking containers, clothing, mattresses, to insulation for their shoes. However, the most common way that we still see weaving today is through basket making.







**Spruce Root Basket,**  
*Chenega*  
**-Berlin Museum**



**Spruce Root Bowl,**  
*Copper River*  
**-Berlin Museum**



**Spruce Root Hat,**  
*Chenega*  
**-Berlin Museum**



**Spruce Root Bottle,**  
*Nuuciq*  
**-Berlin Museum**



**Beach Grass Socks**  
**-June Pardue**



# Gathering the Grass

Beach grass/Beach Rye grows all along the coast in the Chugach region and was traditionally used for weaving. You collect either green grass in the summer to cure or collect grass in autumn that is already cured by nature.

When collecting, you should gather a large armful, but be sure to take no more than 1/3 of the grass in an area to prevent over harvesting.

## **Helpful Tip:**

The binomen of Beach Rye is *Leymus mollis*, and is found on northern coastal sand dunes.





# Curing the Grass



Green grass must be cured. Curing is slightly different than simply drying the grass. It requires you to maintain a stable, dry environment, and to lay the grass out flat to prevent molding. Sunlight, salt, and frost also can help with the curing process.

**Helpful Tip:** Grass can mold even after it's cured. Be sure to store it in a dry place.





# Soaking the Grass

Once the grass has been cured for at least three to four weeks, to begin weaving it must be soaked in hot water to soften. It's very important to make sure that the grass is softened enough to be handled, split, and woven without breaking.

## **Helpful Tips:**

Make sure that you use a long container to soak the grass, and you place the tips of the grass into the water first. They are the most delicate part of the blade of grass and need to be softened first to prevent breakage.





# Grass soaking tips

## **USE HOT WATER**

Make sure that you are using hot water, not cold, or even lukewarm. The hot water softens the grass so that it is more pliable for weaving. Cold water dampens the grass but doesn't soften it like hot water does.

## **MAINTAIN DAMPNESS OF GRASS WHILE WEAVING**

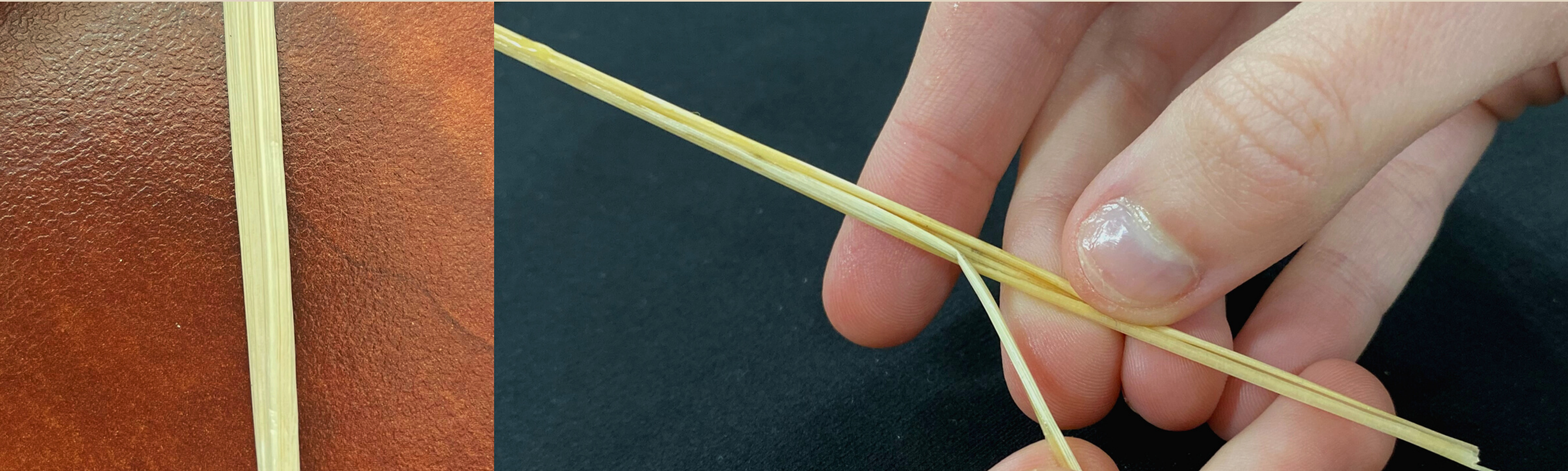
Any time that the grass becomes too dry as you're weaving, it is at risk of breaking. It is very important to constantly keep your grass damp, and to have cups of water and damp towels around to wet the grass when needed.

## **WHEN TO SOAK YOUR GRASS**

It is a good idea to soak grass 30 minutes before you start weaving. You should only soak as much grass as you will be using because it is easier to maintain the right dampness.



# Splitting the Grass



Once the grass is soaked, before you begin weaving you must split the grass into three parts. Each blade has a hard, brittle spine that goes down the middle that needs to be removed. You use the remaining two pieces from the sides to weave.

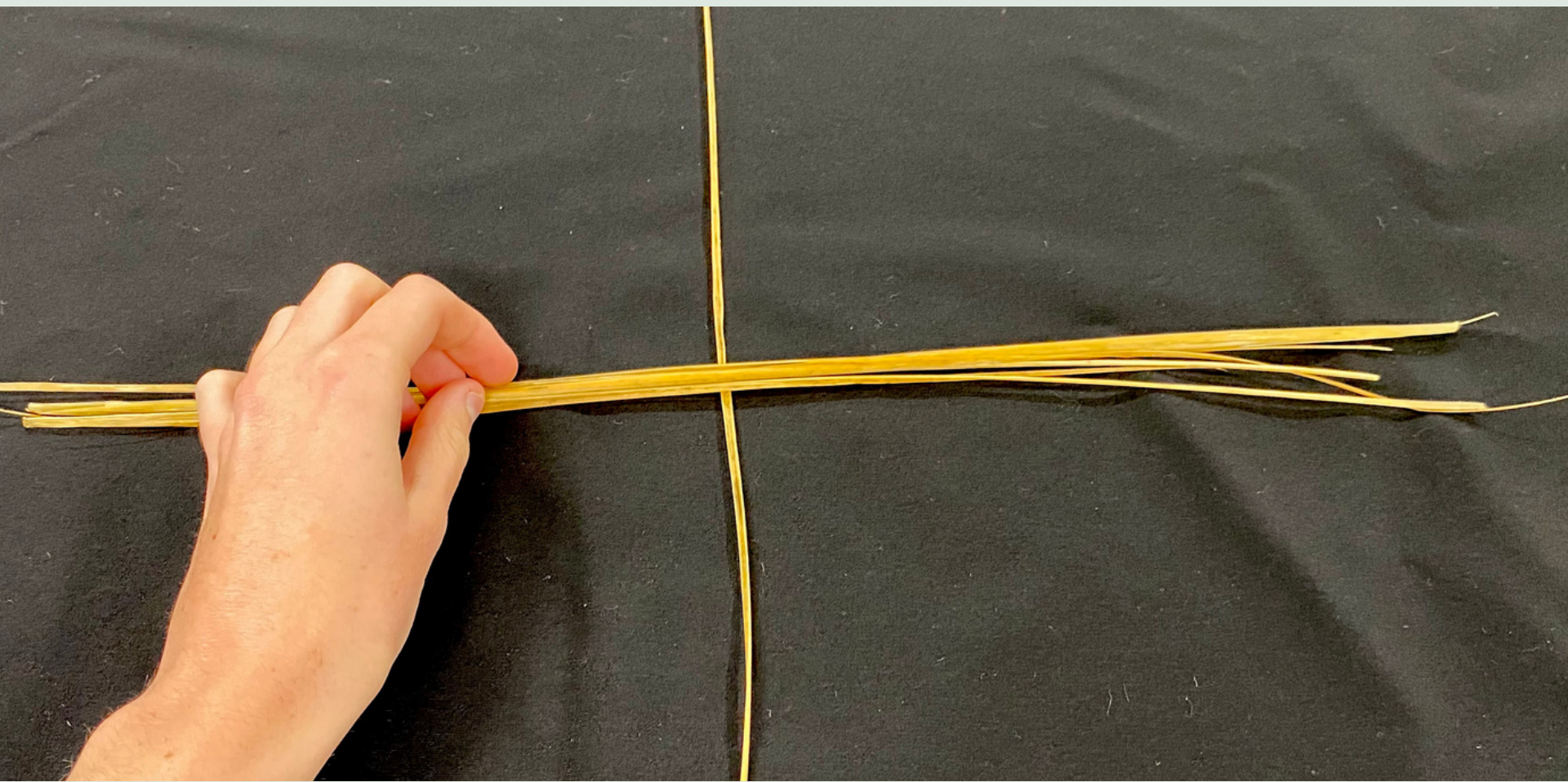
**Helpful Tip:**

Traditionally weavers would sharpen their thumb nails to help with splitting the grass.



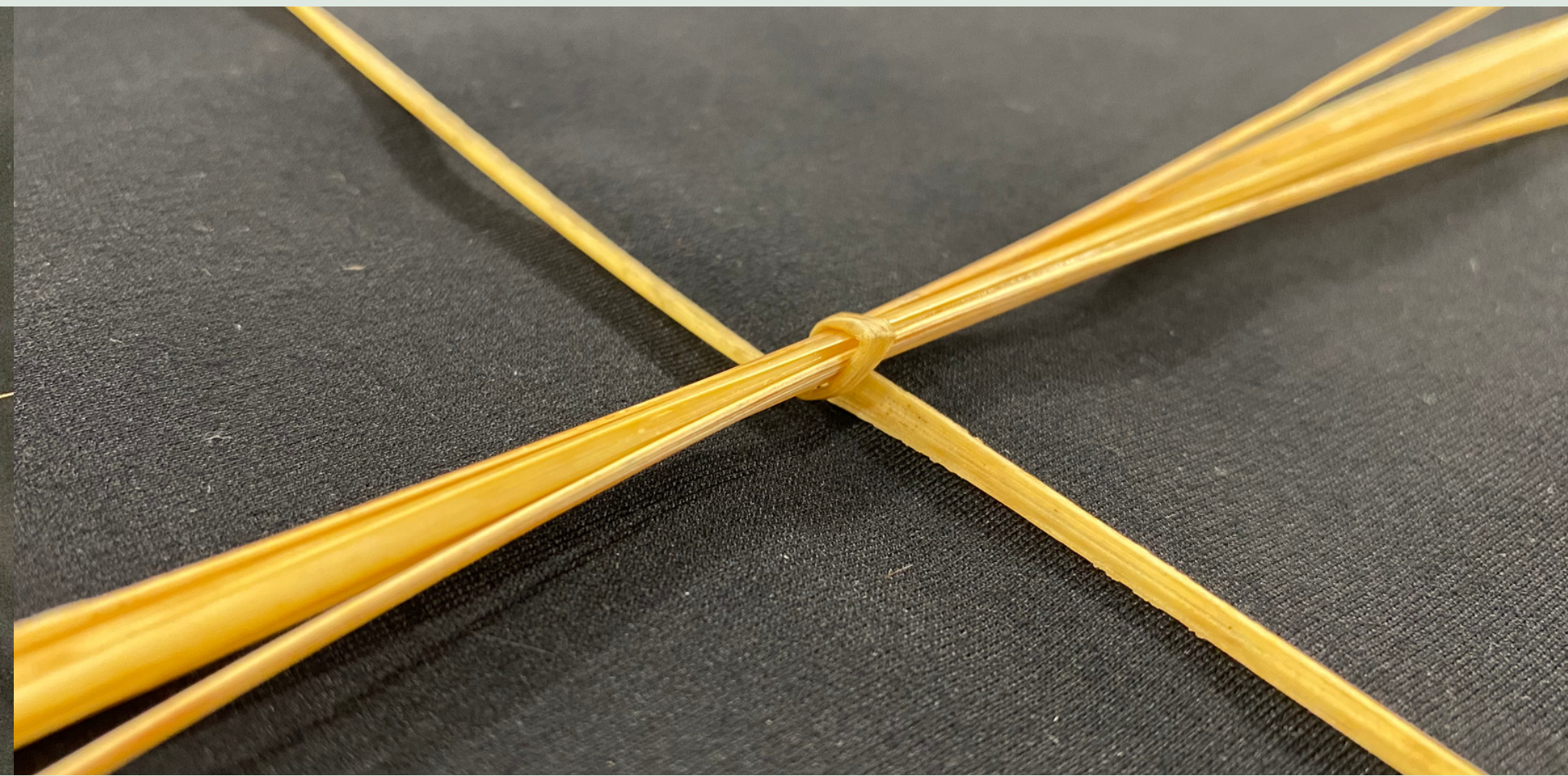
# Beginning the Weave

10



## 10 Spokes 1 weaver

Once you split your grass, you begin weaving by grabbing eleven pieces of grass. Ten will be your spokes, and one will be your weaver.



## Twist

Once you have your eleven pieces of grass, you will begin your weave by doing one twist with your weaver around the ten spokes.





# Tips For Beginning your Weave

## BEGIN IN THE MORNING

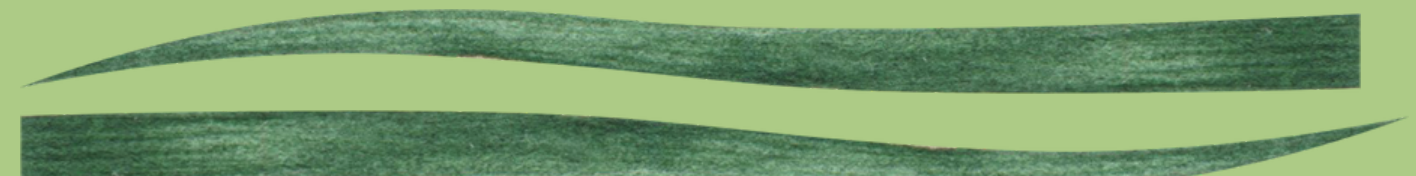
Traditionally, Sugpiaq weavers would begin in the morning when the light was bright, and they were freshly rested. Be sure you begin weaving when you aren't tired, and when you have sufficient light.

## BE INTENTIONAL WITH THE PIECES OF GRASS YOU SELECT

It is helpful to start with spokes that are all similar in length and thickness. It is also helpful to pick a weaver that is long, soft, and thinner.

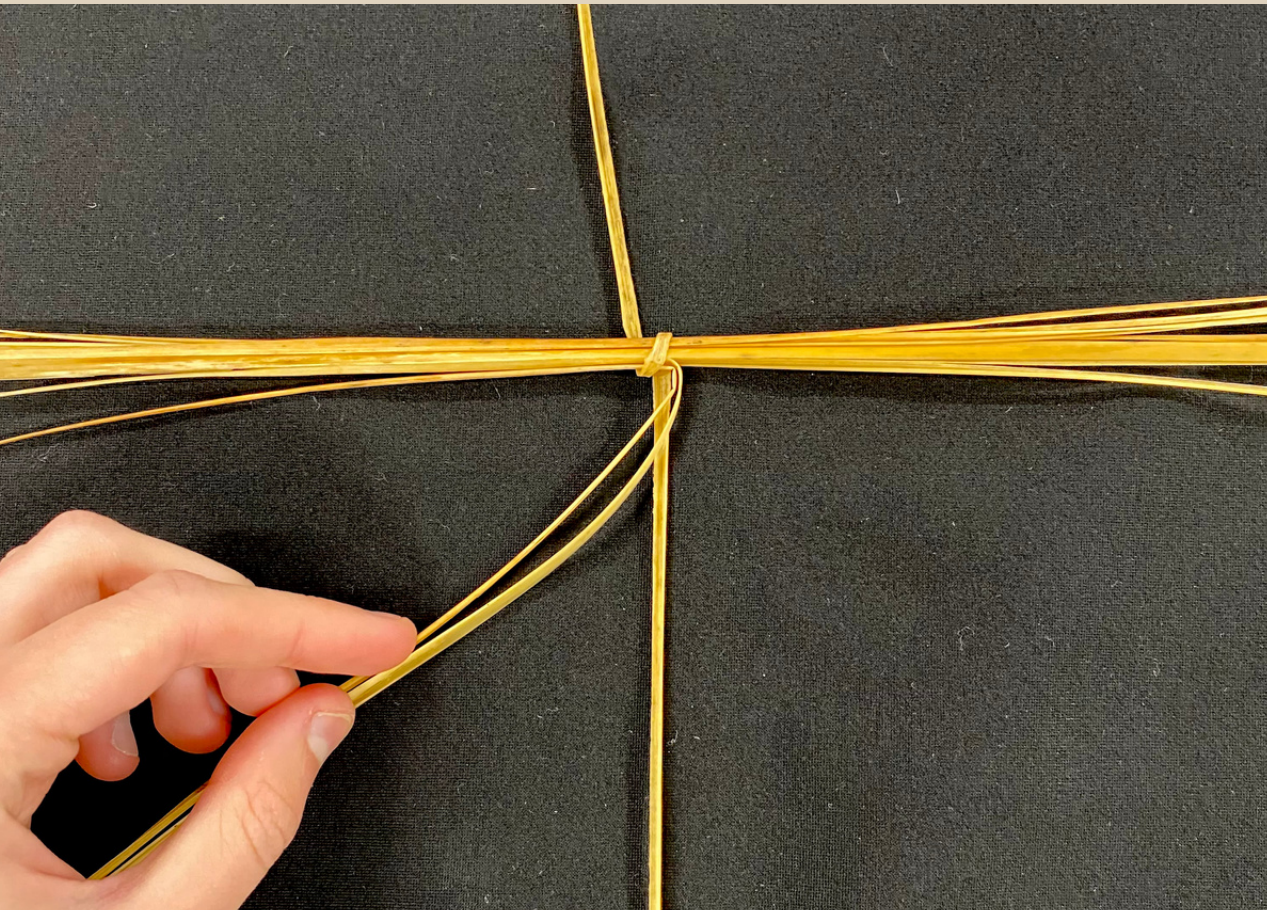
## STAGGER YOUR SPOKES

To create a more symmetrical base for your basket it helps to have five of your spokes going one way and the other five to going the other way to stagger the thicker and thinner ends.



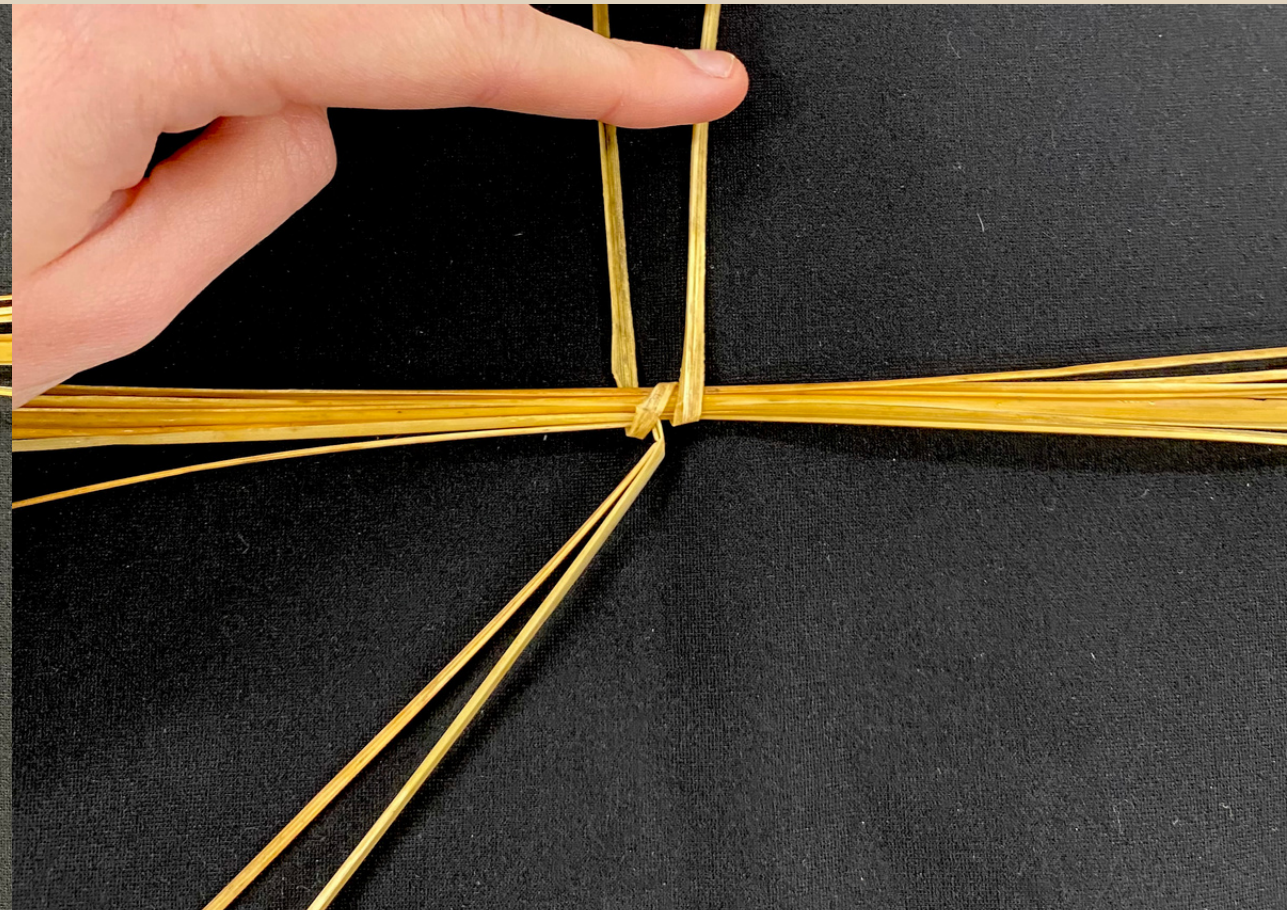


# The Basic Stitch



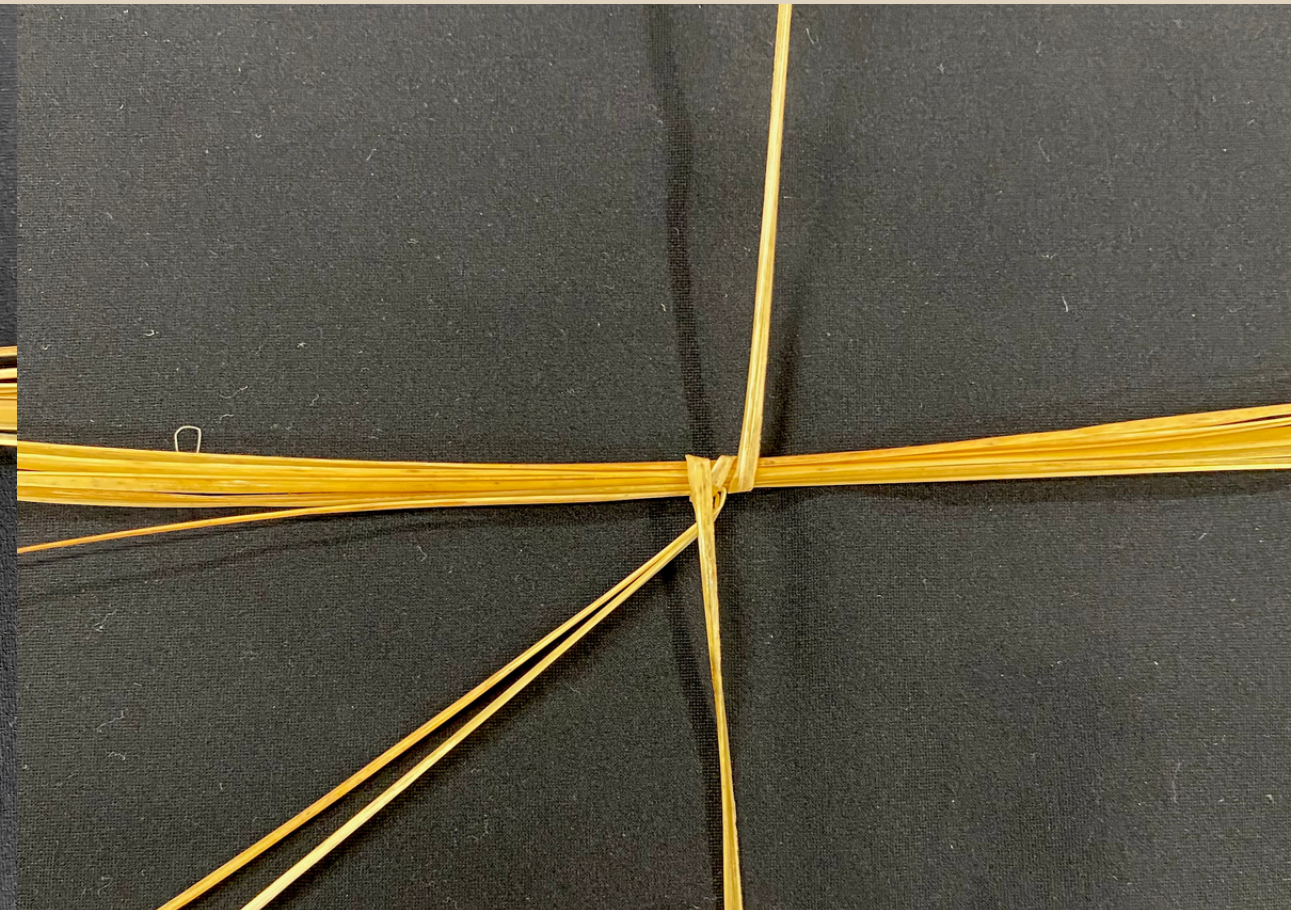
## STEP 1:

**Pull the first spoke over the bottom weaver.**



## STEP 2:

**Pull the bottom weaver up over the spoke so it is parallel with the top weaver.**

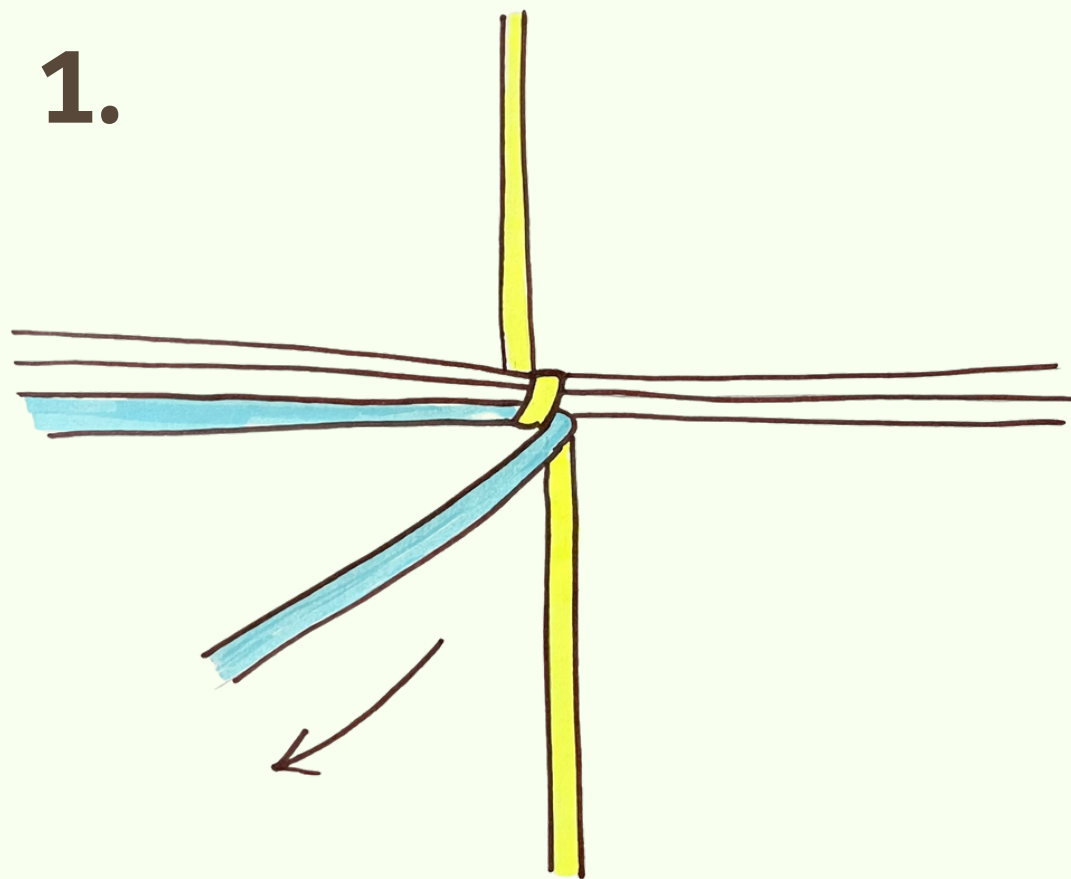


## STEP 3:

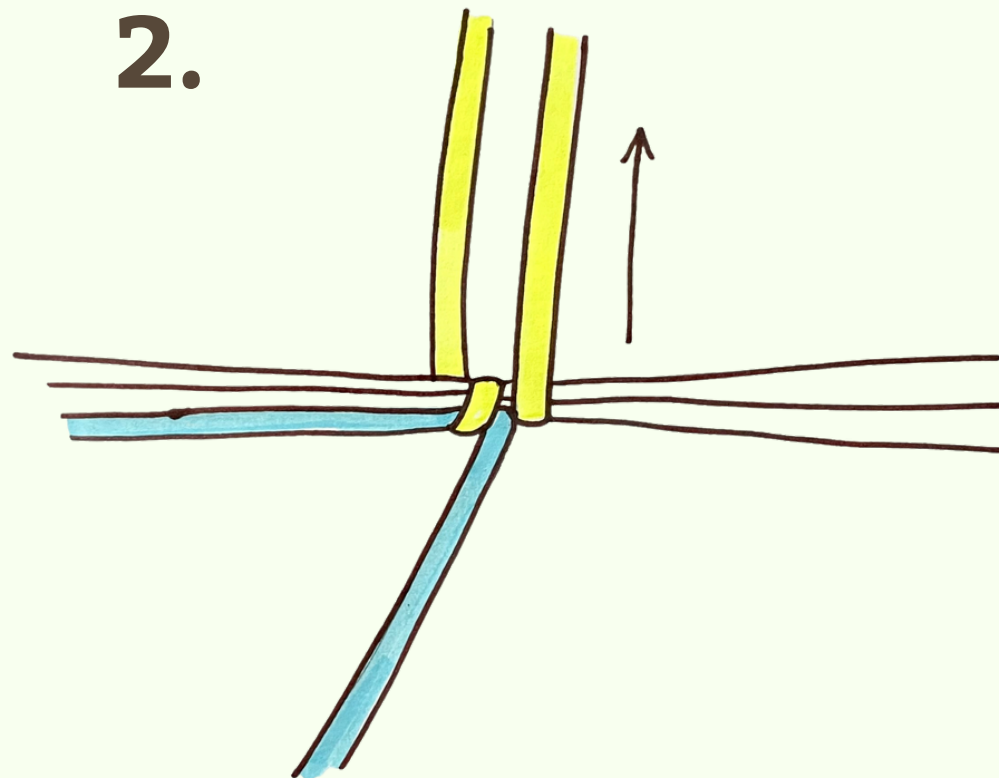
**Pull the top weaver down between the spoke and the bottom weaver, then repeat.**



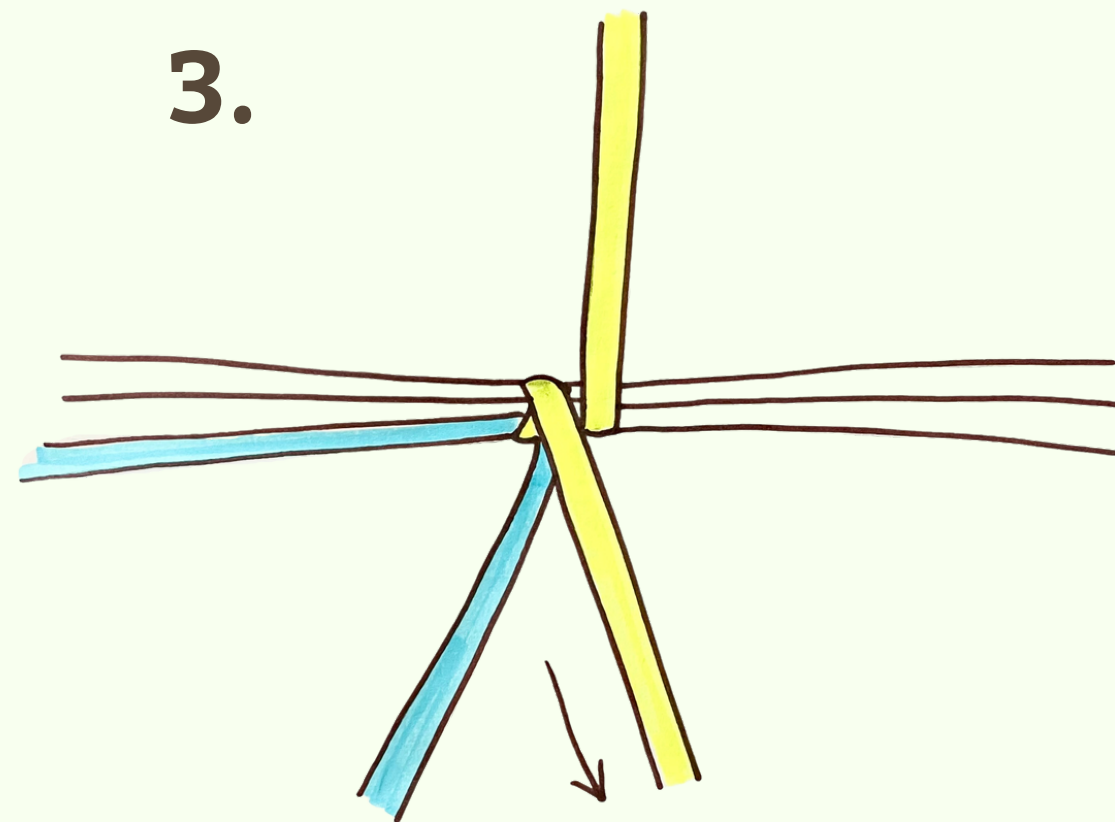
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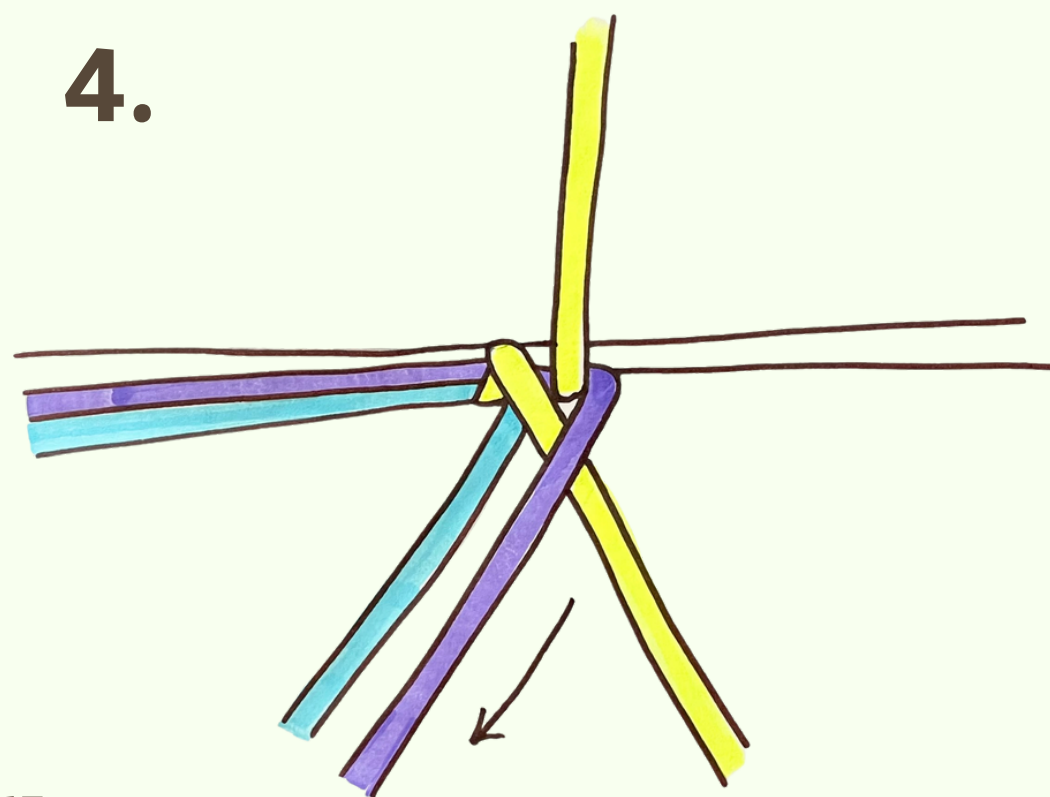
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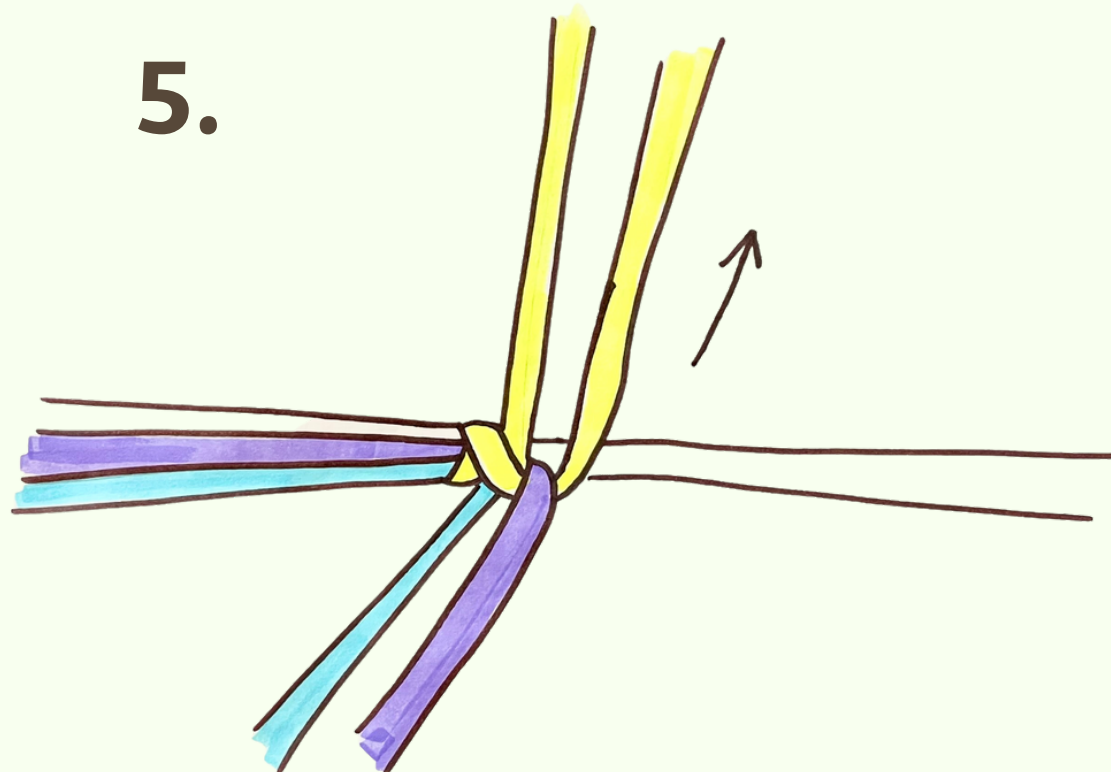
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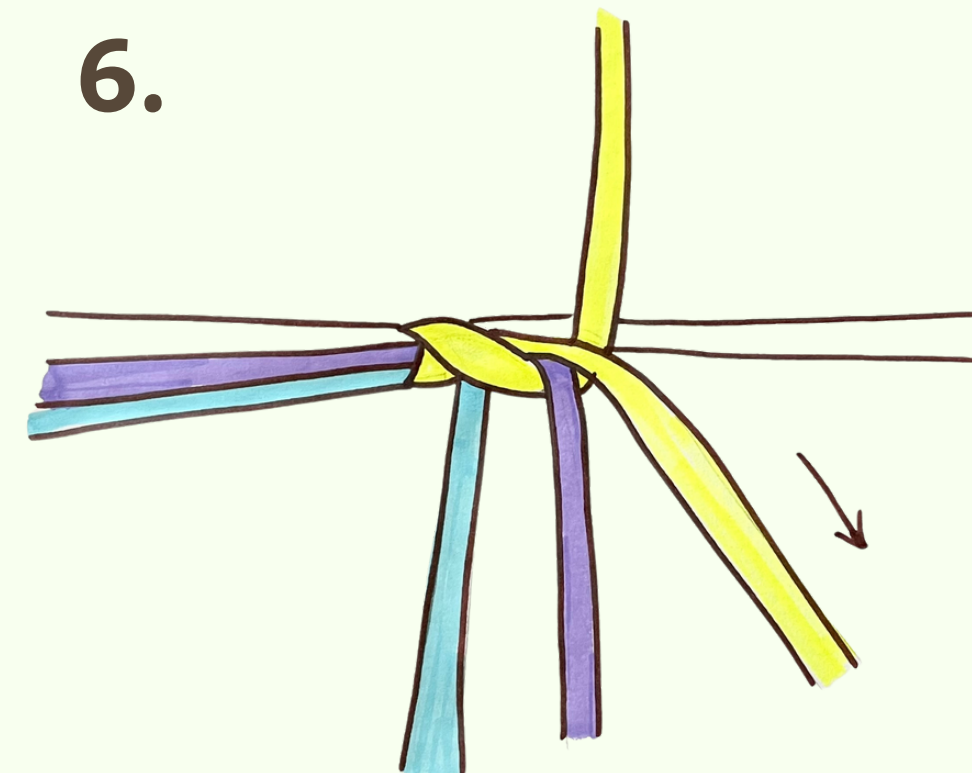
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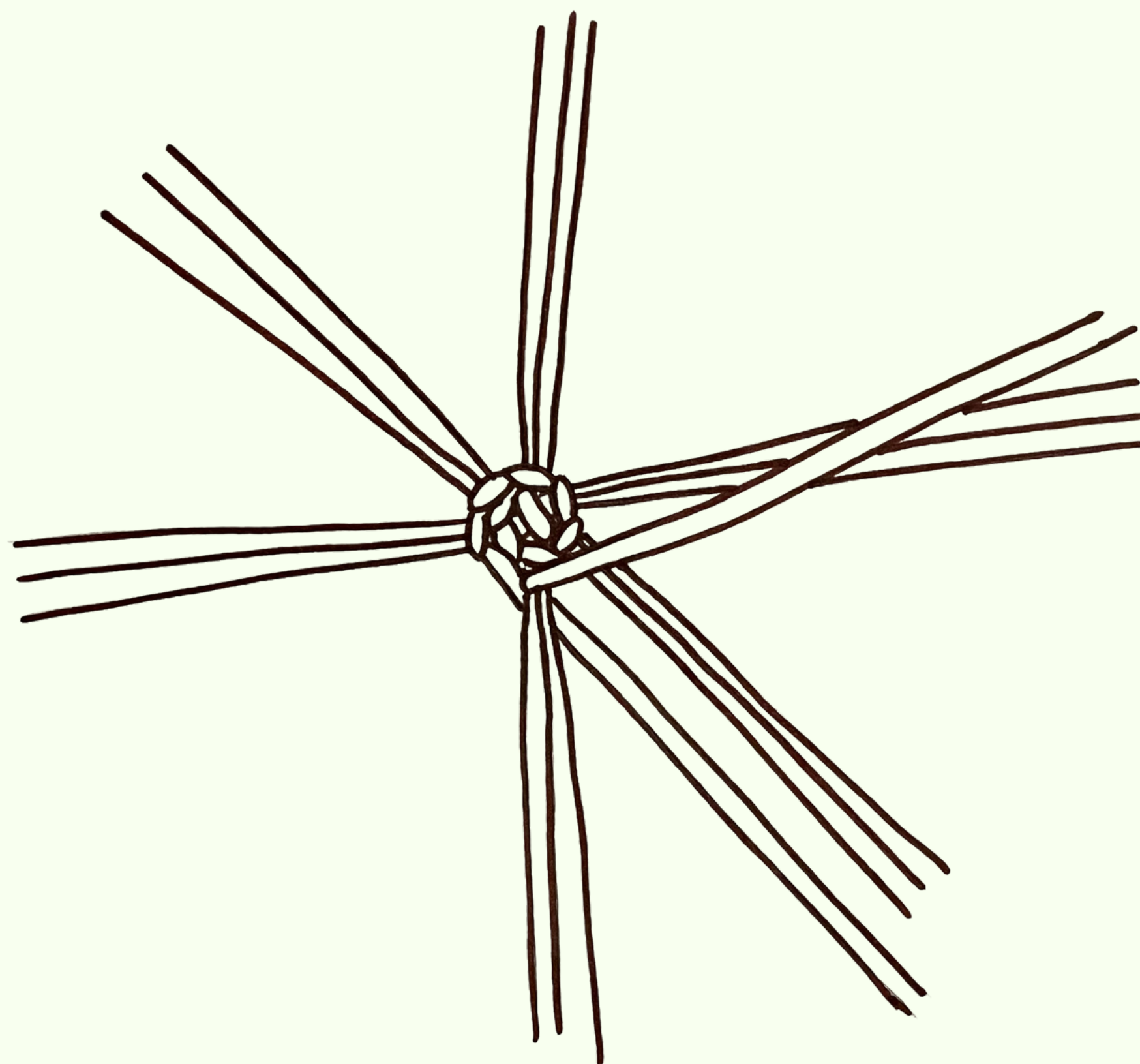
5.



6.







**Helpful Tip:** The first two times stitching around the circle you weave two spokes at a time. After that you weave around only one spoke at a time. This helps keep the weave flat.

"We learned through observation, and that's how I like to teach too."  
- June Pardue



# Adding Spokes

You need to add a new spoke whenever there is a gap in between them.

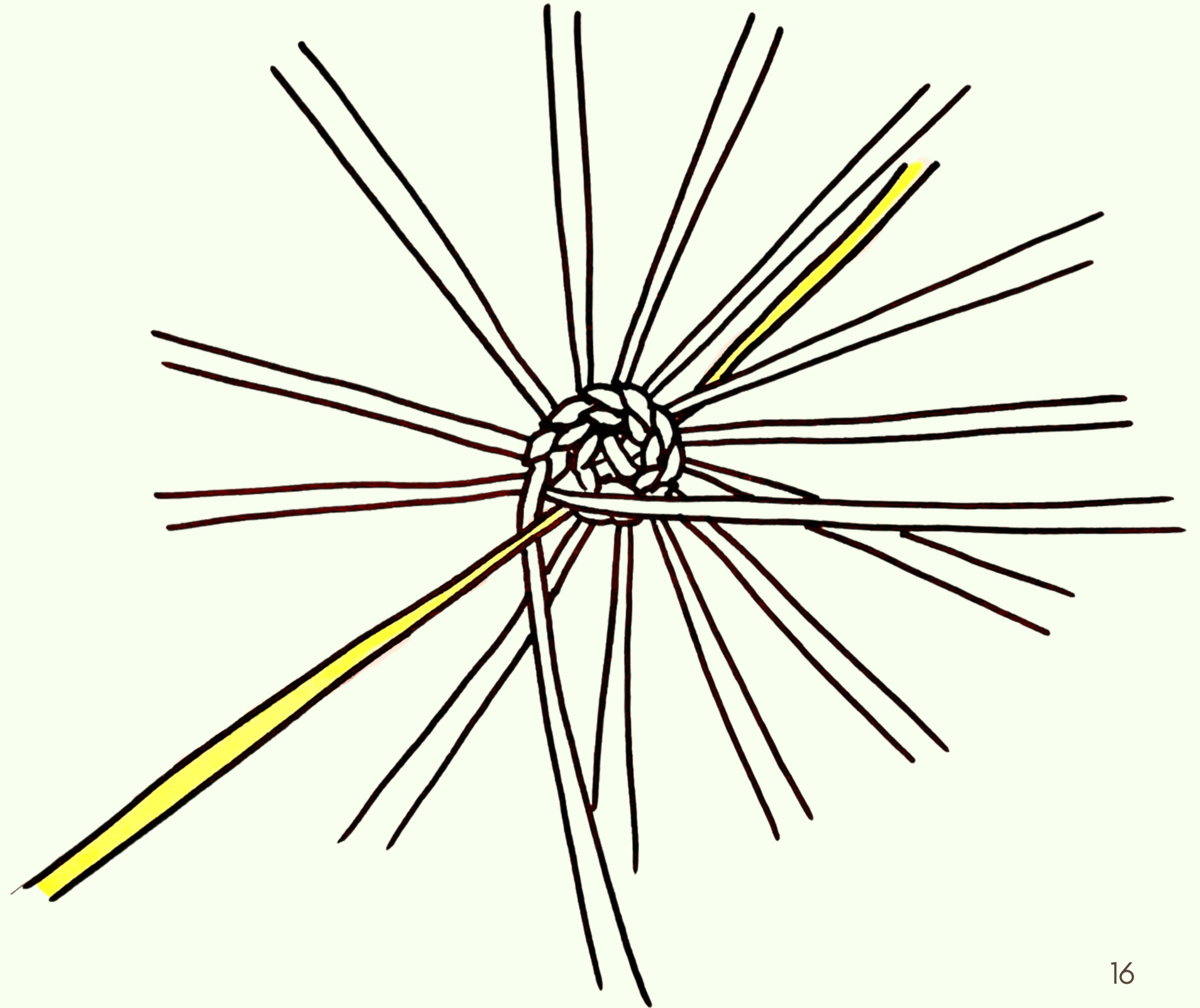
There should never be more than the width of a blade of grass between spokes or your weave will not remain flat.



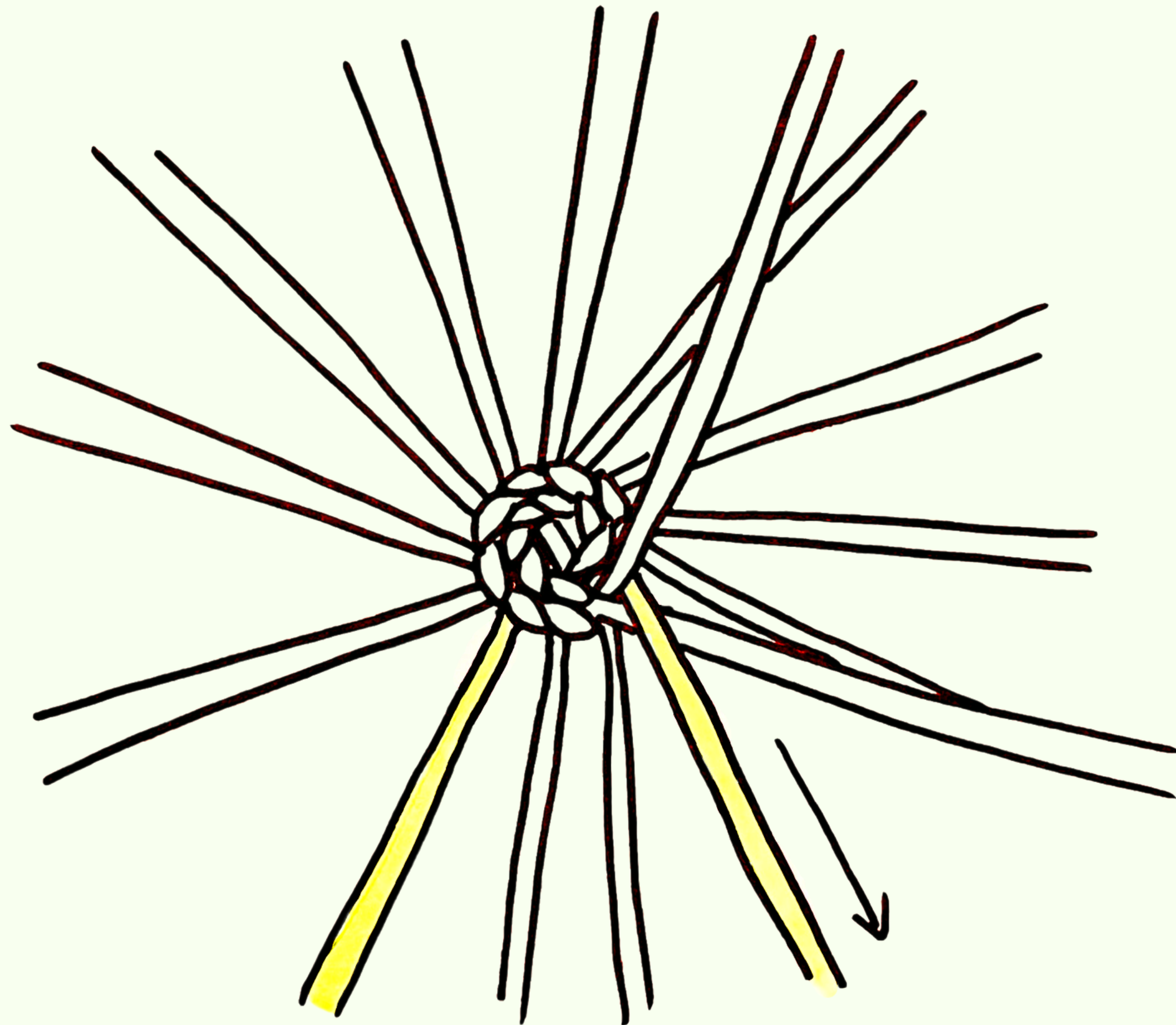


# Steps for Adding Spokes

1. Add one strand of grass under the bottom of the basket aligning the middle of the grass with the gap.
2. Move the bottom section of the new spoke over your bottom weaver to integrate the new spoke. Complete the twining stitch as normal.







3. Continue weaving on the existing spokes until there's a gap in the spokes. (*Helpful Tip: You can alter how many spokes you stitch in between based on where the gap is in the spokes. Try not to overcrowd the spokes.*)
4. Pull down the top half of the new spoke from behind the basket, creating another new spoke. The entire grass piece should now be integrated into the basket. (*it's normal to have a small remaining loop on the back of the weave.*)





## Tips for Adding Spokes

### **SPOKES ADDED UNDER, WEAVER ADDED OVER**

When adding a new spoke, you place the new piece of grass under the weave, and when adding a new weaver you place the new piece of grass on top.

### **NO KNOTS, ONE CONTINUOUS PIECE OF GRASS**

When weaving in the Sugpiaq tradition, there are no knots in the basket. You treat all of the grass like it is one continuous piece that flows together.

### **IT'S A SIMILAR MOTION TO FRENCH BRAIDING**

If you have any experience French braiding, once you get the hang of weaving you begin notice that the motion is very similar.

### **SPOKES KEEP THE BOTTOM FLAT**

As you weave the bottom, the circle naturally spirals outward creating gaps between your spokes. It's important to fill all the gaps with new spokes to ensure that your basket bottom stays flat and doesn't begin curving up into a bowl shape.



# Replacing the Weaver

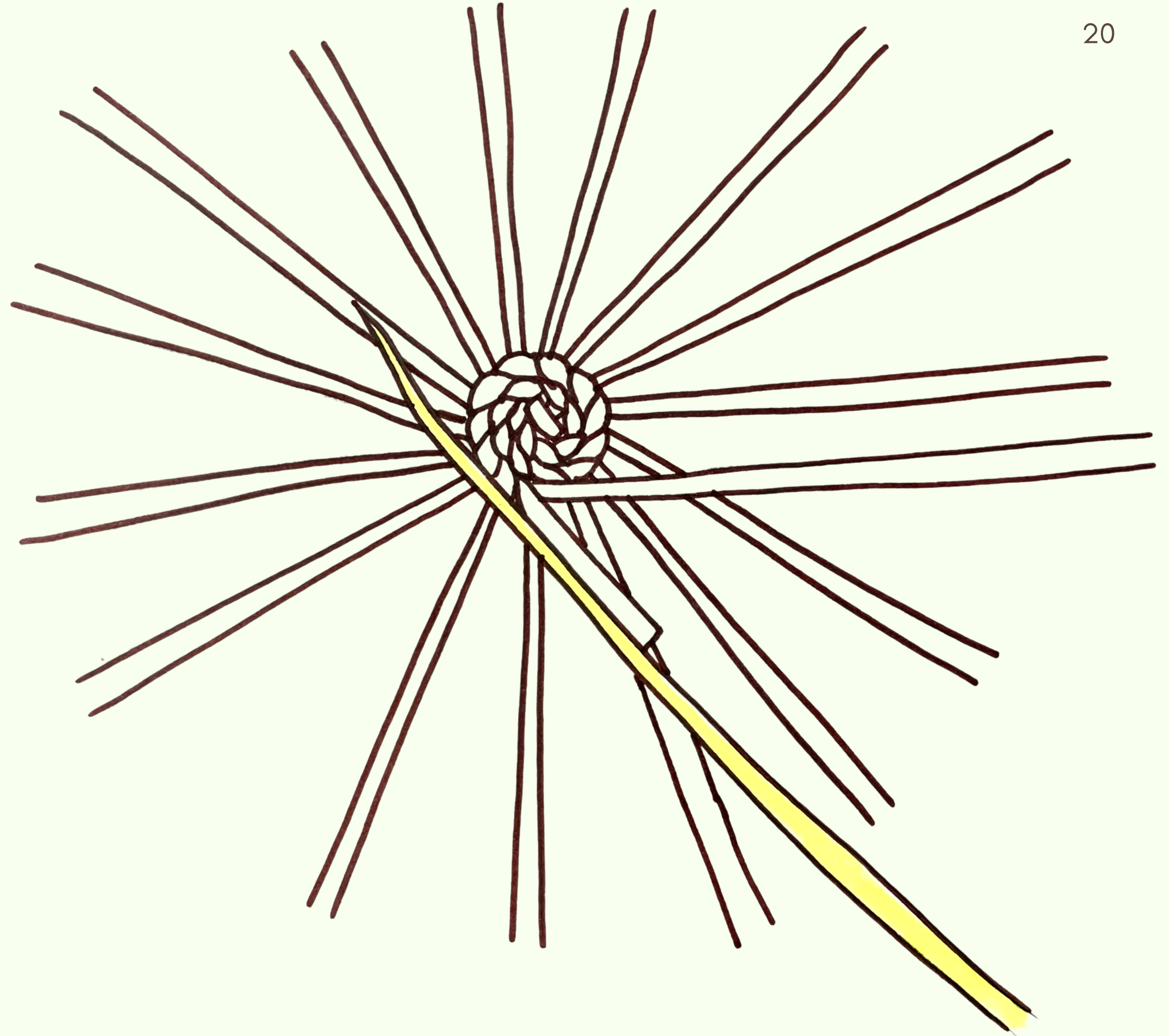
The weaver is what stitches together the entire basket, and it is to be treated like one continuous piece of grass. Knowing how to effectively replace your weaver is one of the most important parts of weaving.



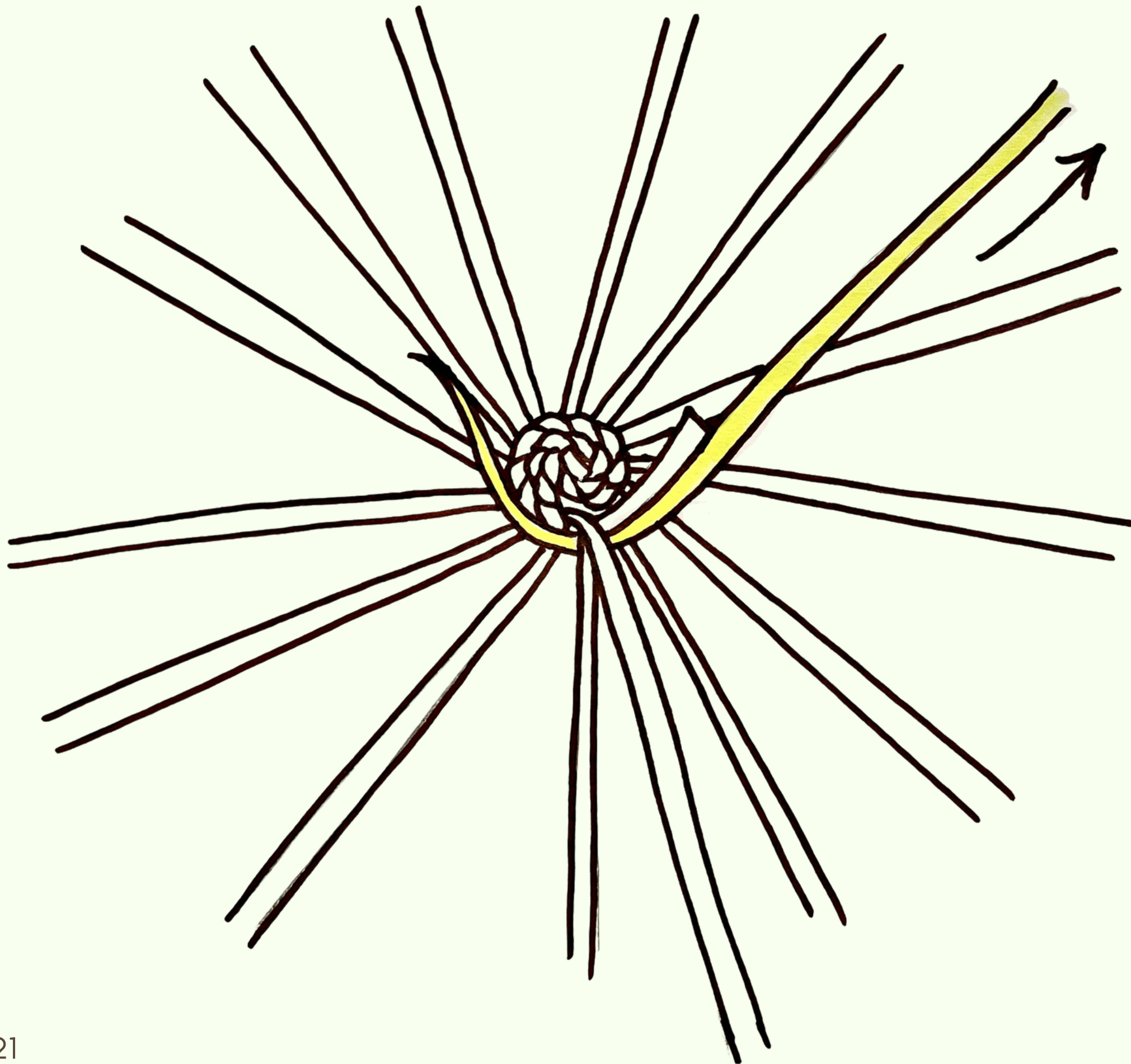


## Steps for replacing your weaver

1. You first need to make sure the weaver that needs replacing is the bottom weaver.
2. Add a new piece of grass to the bottom weaver OVER the top of your weave, leaving a tail that is at least an inch long. (*Leave the thinnest part of the grass out of the weaver, it will break very easily.*)







**3.** Place the next spoke over the old weaver and the new weaver at the same time treating them like one singular piece of grass.

**4.** Then bring the top weaver down.

**5.** Then continue weaving with the new and old weaver together for at least 3 stitches before leaving the remainder of the old weaver behind as you make a new stitch.





**Helpful Tip:** You can hide the tail left by the new weaver in the next row of weaving. All you do is combine it with a nearby spoke the next time it is woven. Then it can be placed inside of the basket. If you don't do this, you will have blunt grass ends sticking out on the outside of your basket.





# Tips for Replacing the Weaver

## **THIN OUT THE END OF THE WEAVER IF NEEDED**

If the end of the weaver is getting too thick, you are able to split it with a needle and turn one half of the weaver into a spoke. You want to be sure that your weaver isn't too thick, or else your stitches will be uneven in size.

## **ADD ENDS TO TIPS**

Each blade of grass has a thick end with a thinner tip. As you are replacing the weaver, make sure that you are matching blade ends to tips, and not ends to ends or tips to tips. This creates a more seamless weaver thickness.

## **DO NOT ADD A WEAVER AND SPOKE AT THE SAME TIME**

You should always avoid adding a spoke and replacing a weaver at the same time. Choose which one is more crucial and do that one first. If you don't do one at a time, the place you added them will be very noticeable in your weave.

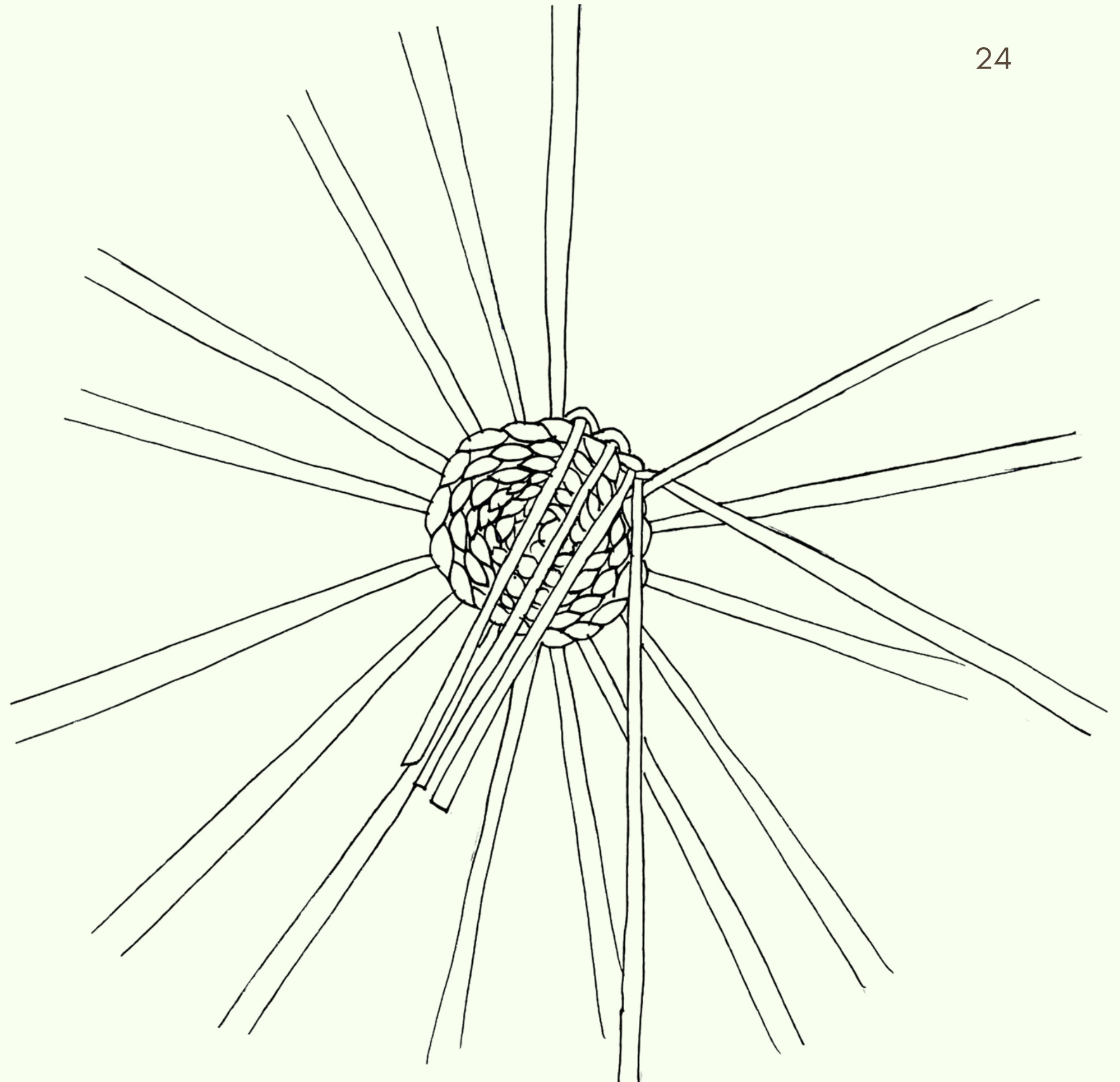


# Turning Stitch

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To start building the walls of your basket, you do a turning stitch.  
To do this you:

1. Identify which side of your medallion will be the inside and which will be the outside.
2. Do a normal stitch, but as you weave hold each spoke flat onto the inside on the medallion creating an edge.







# Tips for Weaving the Walls

## **USE A MOLD TO HELP SHAPE BASKET WALLS**

Using an object as a mold will help with building the walls of your basket. It will provide you with a guide to help you maintain uniformity as you weave. Cups, jars, medicine containers are all good mold options.

## **MAKE THE BOTTOM ONE ROW BIGGER THAN MOLD**

Once you choose the mold you are using for your basket, make sure that you weave the bottom of your basket one row larger than the circumference of the mold. This is to ensure that the basket walls will fit around the mold.

## **WEAVE A ROW OR TWO BEFORE USING THE MOLD**

In the first few rows of weaving when building the walls of your basket, it is difficult to use a mold, so it is helpful to weave without a mold for at least one row.



# The Third Weaver

If you want to create a hard turn or add decorative designs and colors, you will need to add a third weaver.

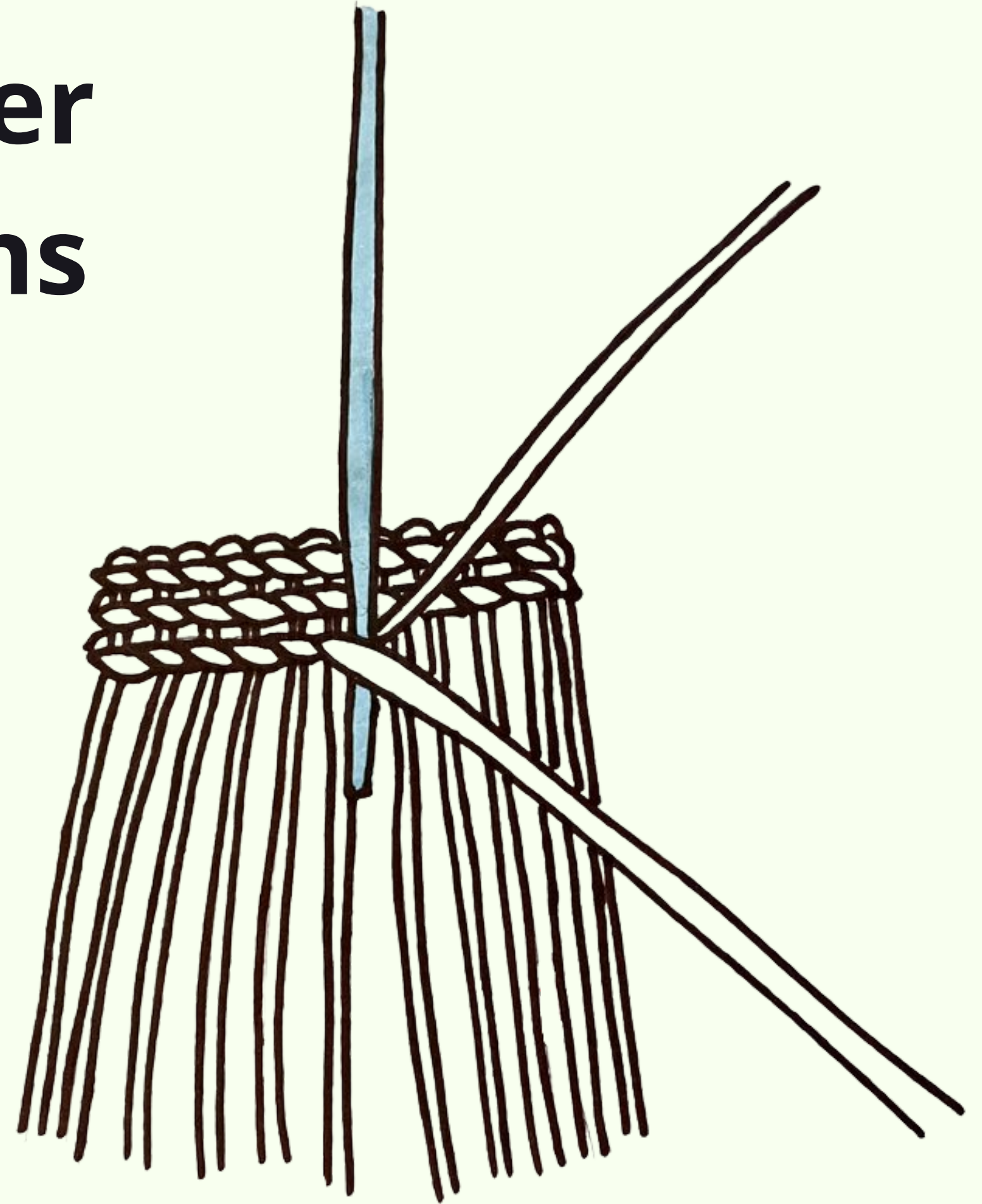
The third weaver is similar to the other weavers, but it is not integral to the structure of the basket. It is layered on top of each stitch to add color and decoration.





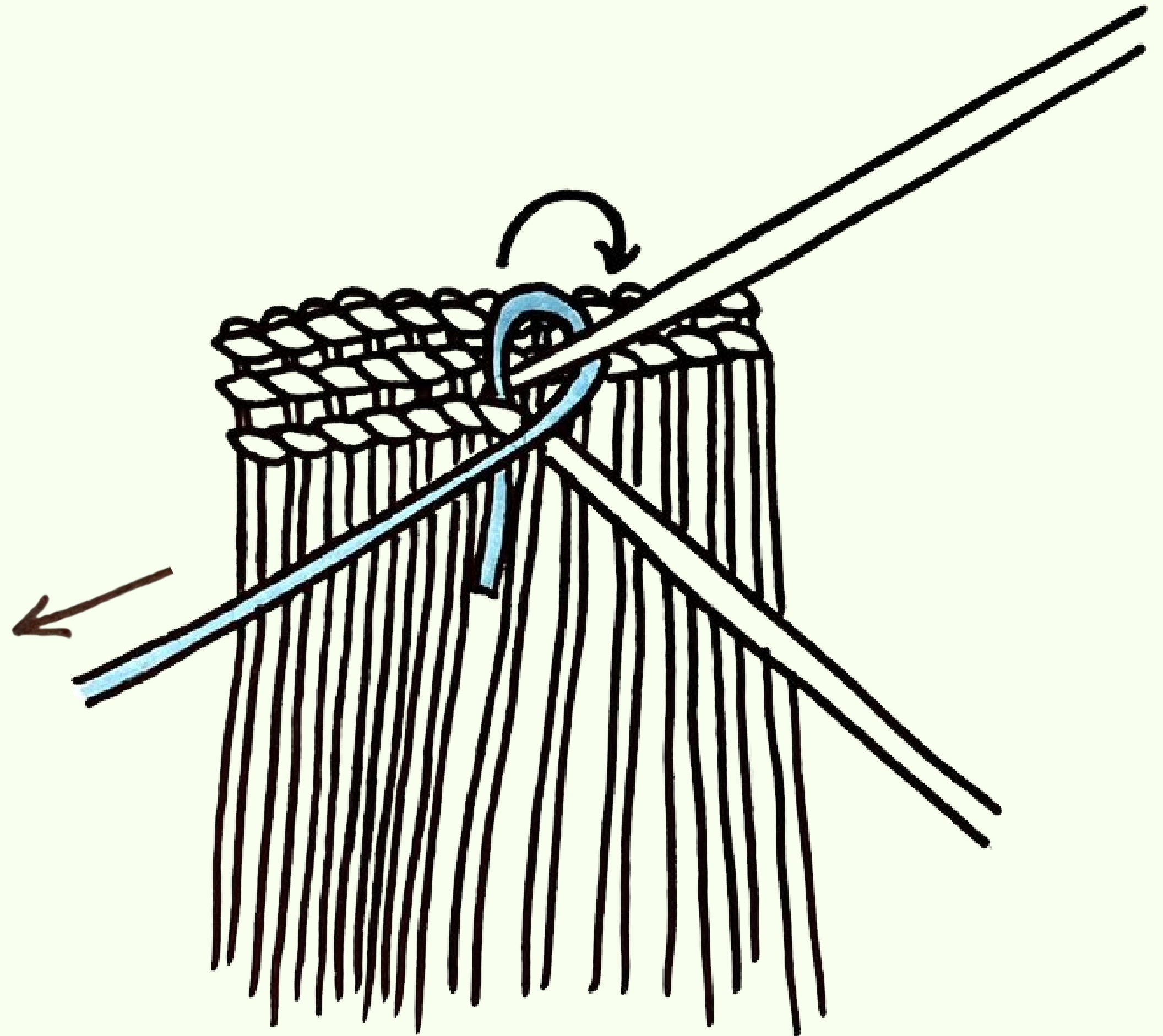
# Adding the 3rd Weaver for Decorative Designs

1. Wherever you want the color to be, you start one stitch back.
2. Add the colored 3rd weaver by combining a short tail of it with a spoke, and having the remaining part stick upward.





3. Then you start doing a stitch normally, and bring the next spoke over the bottom weaver.
4. Then, as you're bringing down the top weaver, you wrap the 3rd weaver over and around it. (*This allows the 3rd weaver to layer on top of the stitch that was just made*)





# The Binding Stitch

**The binding stitch is used to finish the basket.**

"When I was taught how to bind off, they say you only do it in the morning, not after you've been weaving all day."

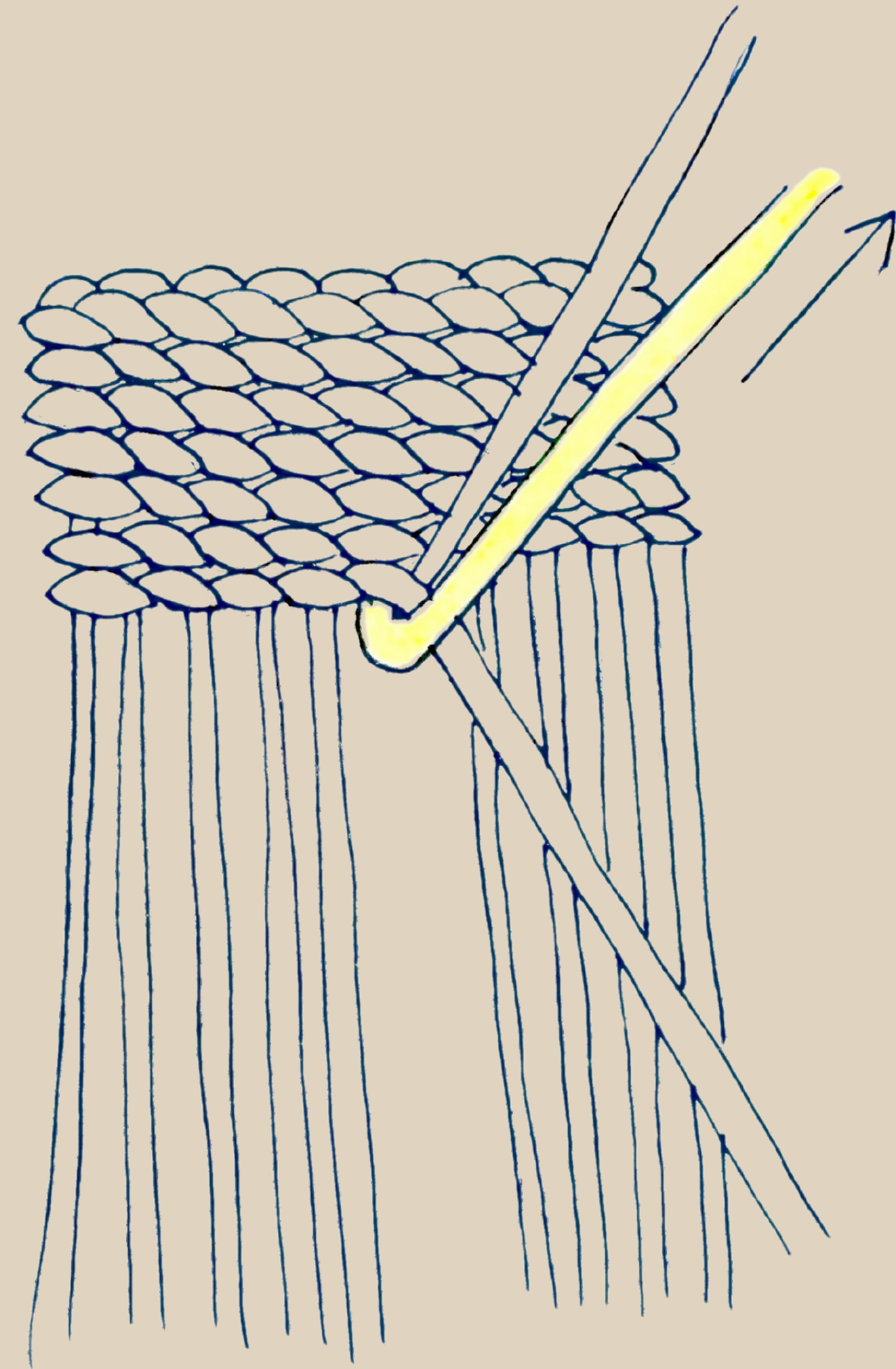
*-June Pardue*





1. You start the binding stitch by doing a normal stitch around one of the spokes.

2. Then you bring the spoke you just wove up over the bottom weaver.

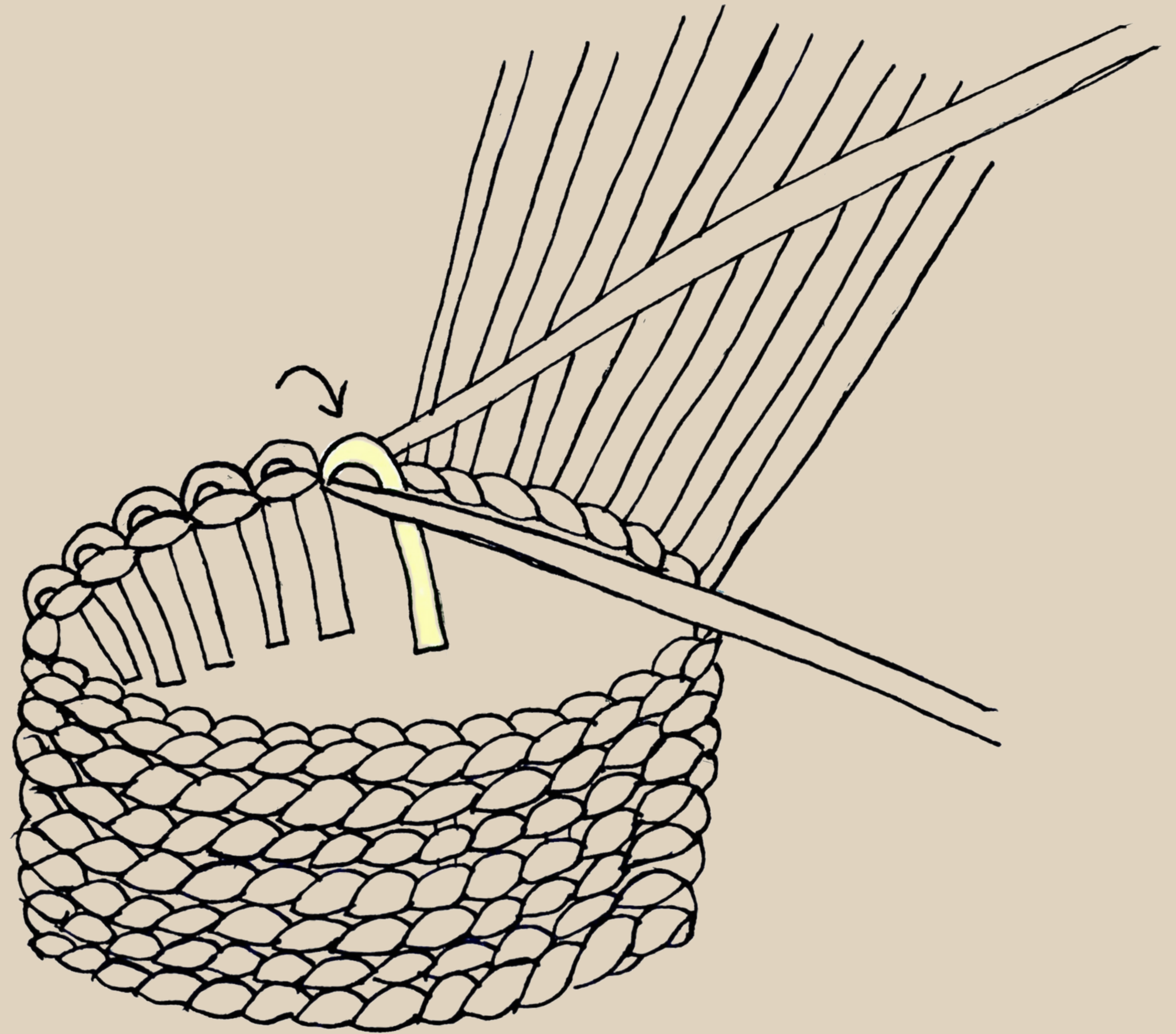






3. Then you wrap over and around the bottom weaver and tuck the spoke inside of the basket.

4. Repeat this process for all of the spokes.







# Tips for Binding Off

## SECURING STITCH

After you finish binding off all of the spokes, you thread a needle onto a weaver and sew over a few of the surrounding stitches to lock the weave into place.

## TRIMMING THE SPOKES

After the basket is completely secured, you can trim off the ends of the spokes that are on the inside of the basket. Do not cut them too short or they will be more likely to unravel.

## MAKING A LID

If you wish to make a lid for your basket, you follow the same basic rules for making a basket. The knob edges will require a soft turn stitch, and you will need to make sure that you make the circumference of the lid at least two rows larger than the basket rim.






# Tips for Using Raffia



Raffia is a cheap and accessible alternative material to use if you don't have access to grass, need weaving materials for large groups, or if you simply wish to just practice the techniques. Here are some tips for weaving with raffia:

1. Wash the raffia in dish soap and hot water to remove the waxy outside coating.
2. It does not need to be dampened as much as real beach grass.
3. It is flimsier than beach grass, so be aware of that if you are making a big project.





"50 some odd years ago...Then we could count on our hands how many of us were actually Sugpiaq weavers, there were not many of us. I think today I can't count on my hands how many weavers there are. So whatever we did worked."



- *June Pardue*











