

## The Soul of Our Skin

*By Sheila Johnson*

Our skin is the largest organ of our body. It covers, protects, and holds it altogether. Burn victims are able to survive injuries and infections that would simply destroy other organs of our body. Skin makes room for our eyes to peek out of our heads and see the world and communicate with our brain when danger is approaching or beauty overwhelms our senses. Skin covers our mouth and allows it to stay still when it needs to shut up! Our skin alerts us to tiny, almost invisible critters such as spiders, ants, fleas, aphids, and bedbugs if they should choose to crawl over it. Our skin is our body's best friend. Our skin keeps the oxygen flowing in and out of every part of our body. Our skin is our best friend until its color is recognized as something contrary to our beliefs; until its color is seen as a threat; until its color makes the difference between who wins and who loses; until its color determines who lives and who dies.

Even at the ripe old age of sixty-seven, I still have to deal with colorism. As a child, my grandmother barked at the idea of me drinking coffee because she thought it would turn my creamy yellow skin dark, thus placing me on a lower level within my race. She thought that I should be guarded from the sunrays because dark Negroes had an even harder time with surviving the world's institutional racism. Unfortunately, she was correct on many points. My grandfather, one of my real heroes, would get nasty looks and frightened little children of European descent because he was a beautiful ebony color as a direct descendant from West Africa. And my grandmother was careful not to take him to too many social gatherings outside of their beautiful home that he had built for her.

As a teenager, I suffered a lot of isolation. I was too dark to fit in with the high school sororities, and too light to be accepted in the black hang out places and weekend parties. To many African Americans, the shade of our skin determines the scale of our success—even in this new day of Black is beautiful, and the darker the cherry, the sweeter the juice.

So when we talk about skin, I have a deeper appreciation for the many colors of the rainbow, and the many tapestries made by God's hands. And I often ask, "What is the color of your soul?"