A Graphic Experience While Getting Chemotherapy
Marjorie S. Rosenthal, MD.

Marjorie S. Rosenthal is assistant director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Clinical Scholars Program, associate research scientist in the Department of Pediatrics at the Yale University School of Medicine, and public voices fellow with The Op-Ed Project. She created this graphic based on her experiences while getting chemotherapy for colon cancer.

Port*land
a gathering place for people with ports
and those who love them

by Margi Rosenthal
Six months into my colon cancer treatment, my quarterly CT scans were stable. I was switched to maintenance chemo and my side effects were minimal. Every other week, I sat in the chemo-pod, not really participating in the chemo-pod conversations. But I thought that every time I quietly nodded in agreement to my chemo-pod mates, I was sending a prayer of hope to the cancer gods.

Just like the Hindu goddess Durga riding on her tiger, Priya had 12 arms and used them powerfully. With these arms, she brought warm blankets and needles and IV tubing and bags of blood counts and yogurt and tea and ursine caps and new TD bandages and soothing words.

And like the goddess Durga, her gifts were both balm of preservation...

...and annihilation.

But alas, Maggie, with whom I shared the chemo-pod for 4 hours every 2 weeks, started talking about something altogether different.
If I were having this from any daughter or my friends, I would challenge them on this conversation.

But here I was in some in-between space. I didn’t really know these people, but I set them every two weeks for hours at a time. We were all attuned to IV bags of hope, plugged into the 20 x 20 foot infusion pod. We were stuck with each other.

But what about what my peers had said about these crazy people? Wasn’t the fact of us not working and scraping along to click up to the top veracity? We all on disability or SSI or being cared for by family and friends while we placed our lives in the hands of Big Pharma and our oncologists and our nurse, the goddess...burger?

The nurses. I felt like I was working, working on being alive when my daughters came home from school. And cute to my mom, and available for my former student friends. None of which was paid work but made me feel productive.

So if my sisters-in-law felt productive, too, then perhaps they felt justified in taking down poor people who they assumed weren’t working. Without really thinking that everyone has their own reason to fight. Often without a Mithraic goddess. And each with its own set of side effects.

What, of course, reminded me that Virginia...Jill, and Maggie may be fighting other demons than I knew nothing about. Or maybe it was just the combination of coming into my chair, getting under my blanket, taking off my laptop and just knowing they would stop talking soon.