Sometimes when you travel it seems like you run into the same person at various points along the way. Recently, while traveling back home from the Dominican Republic where my daughter is teaching, I had one of those experiences.

I saw the same woman at the ticket kiosk, baggage counter, magazine store and security check line. It was at this latter point that I really took notice. She was in a very tight embrace with a younger woman (who I later learned was her daughter). There were more than the usual hugs and goodbye tears.

The parent sat a few rows ahead of me during the flight to the U.S., and I could see that she remained very emotional throughout. As it turns out, she was near me during the two-mile walk required to get through passport control and U.S. customs in the Atlanta airport.

This is where I asked her the first three words: "Are you alright?" Well she wasn't. During Atlanta's poor imitation of the Bataan death march, she identified herself as "Sherri," and revealed the horrible circumstances she was enduring. Her only child was in medical school in Santiago because they couldn't afford a school in the U.S. She had sold many of her possessions and scraped together all of her savings to afford this one-week visit with her daughter because the student was very homesick and was threatening to quit med school. It was highly unlikely she was going to see her daughter again for at least three years.

Upon her return to the U.S., Sherri would face additional difficulties and many unknowns. Her abusive, soon-to-be ex-husband was challenging every step of the divorce process. She was certain this would continue because he had been totally non-supportive of their daughter or her for the last few years. Sherri was also uncertain if she would be able to keep her 2 jobs. She had left her jobs abruptly when her daughter's dreams were at stake.

Those of you who know me know that I'm not always Mr. Positive. I can easily lapse into cynicism and sarcasm especially when dealing with the giant bureaucracy which substitutes for a welcome when returning to the U.S. But this woman clearly needed some pumping up. Borrowing from coaching experience along with some of the leadership and motivational presentations I've given, I did my best to raise her spirits during the 30 minutes or so we were walking. By the end, I felt I had made a difference. Just as we headed our separate ways, an Atlanta security agent who was directing passenger traffic, did something I'd never seen. She made eye contact with Sherri and said just three words: "Welcome Back Home." As I walked to my line I could see this mom, who clearly was carrying a very big burden, start crying through a big smile.

Daily we deal with dozens of parents, administrators, staff, and students – many of whom are facing even bigger challenges. Don't underestimate the power of the words you may just routinely say – they might invite a life story, or help someone to believe that their life is about to get better just because of your words. It might be the two words: "I understand." Maybe it'll take four: "How can I help?"
What will your three words be?

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