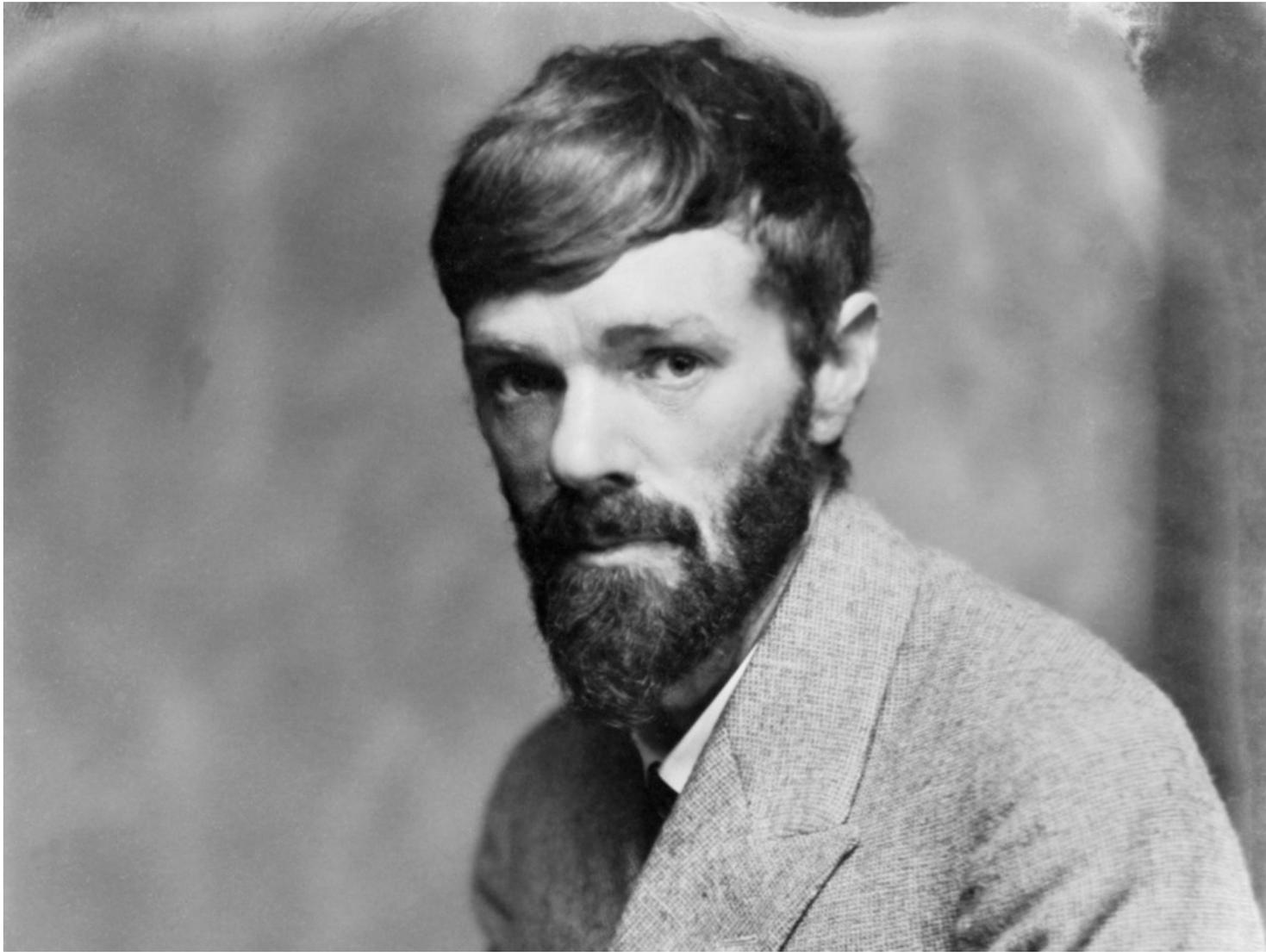# LOOK! I'VE COME THROUGH!

TRANSITIONING TO TECHNICAL WRITING

Filip Hanzelka, Red Hat

Where do I come from?

- Lecturer of British studies → *literature*

- Teacher of English for specific and academic purposes; academic writing → *education*

- A recent convert to the pleasures of IT (data-driven analysis of literary works, scripts in Python)

- Missing: team work, experience of the business sector → TW in Red Hat

Presentation outline

- I/ What was difficult?
  - **Technical** challenges
  - **Organizational** challenges
  - **Technical writing** challenges

- II/ How have I overcome the difficulties?
  - What have I learned about surviving a/ in a **corporate environment**, and b/ as a **technical writer**?
  - Coping strategies: **remaining sane**

FNR 1.0

- Fundamental natural rights according to John Locke (1632-1704):
    - Life
    - Liberty
    - Property

FNR 2.0

- Fundamental natural rights according to the US Declaration of Independence (1776):
  - Life
  - Liberty
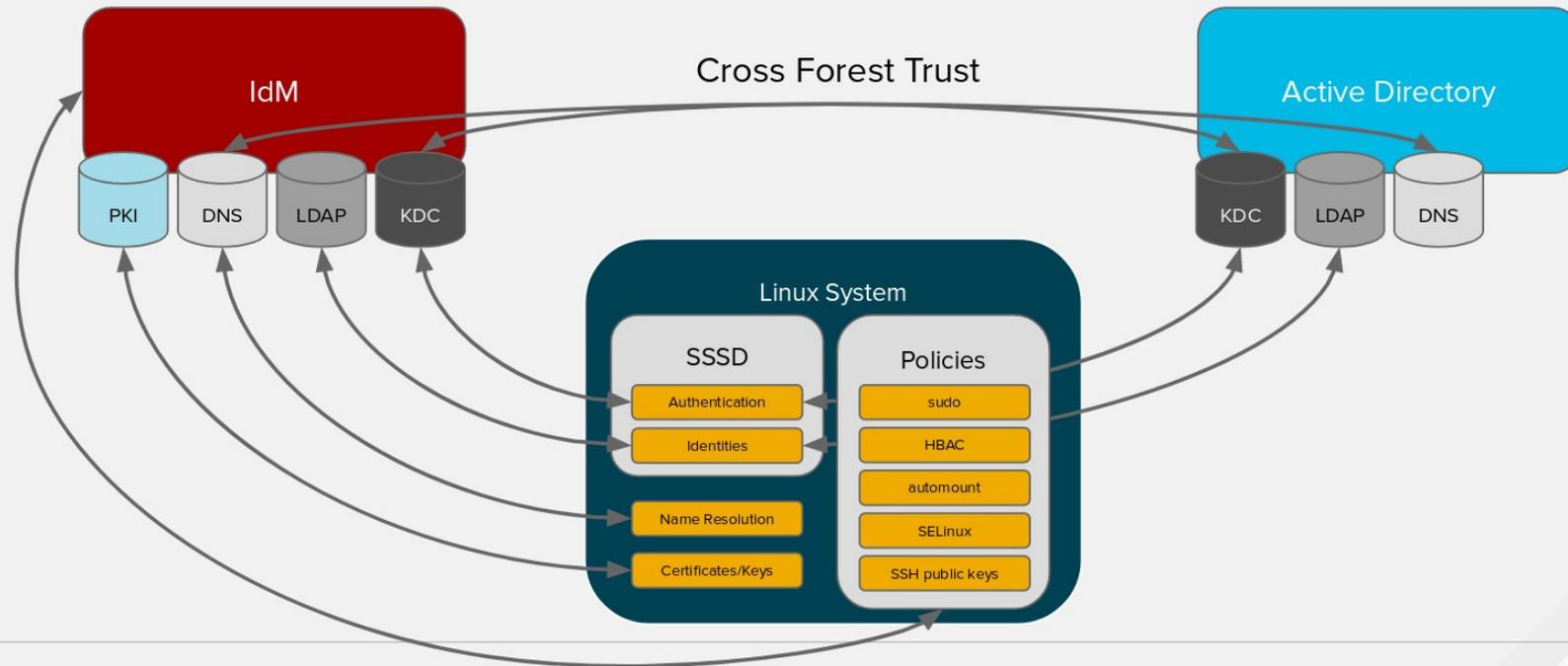 - The pursuit of happiness

THOMAS JEFFERSON.

FNR 3.0

- Fundamental natural rights according to Jan Wildeboer, Red Hat Evangelist (cca 1975-):
  - Life
  - Liberty
  - **Access to code**

Complex product

- Related to setting up the testing environment for IdM, a **complex product**

- Related to learning to use the technical writing tools, such as DocBook, AsciiDoc, git, Fedora

  → after a short peer-led onboarding, lassez-faire conditions

  → the need to ask, **beg** for help (thank you, Quo Vadis!)

- Roles and responsibilities in relation to my job, technical writing, of:
  - The TWM: Mother Confessor? A point of contact for facilities and HR? A lobbyist?
  - The DPM: a catalyst? a slave driver? A procedural maniac?
  - The SMEs: partners in searching for the best solution or impatient contractors with a limited amount of time for docs-related work with specific reviews needing to be planned weeks in advance?

- Lack of clarity of who's responsible for what **intensified the feeling of being a beggar**. A humbling experience. :-)

WWD: Absence of a definition of *how* a technical writer operates; absence of *shadowing*

- TW as a **researcher**?
- TW as a **secretary**?
- TW as a **writing quality engineer**?
- TW as a **textual gymnast**?
- What's a healthy proportion of a/ **testing** vs. **studying** vs. **writing**; b/ **working on one's own** vs. **collaborating** with an SME or a peer?
- How to deal with the flooding of the email inbox?

   → *Shadowing, mentoring* **as an answer.**

WWD: Absence of personas in user stories

- Difficult to distinguish between user stories requiring an **in-depth knowledge** of the product and those targeted at **newbies**

- Related to the absence of any guidelines as to **what seniority was required/appropriate** in a TW to be able to deal with user stories targeted at a/ **inexperienced** and b/ **experienced** sysadmins

  → I ended up writing many advanced user stories as a TW1

  TW1 as a technical content **maintainer?**

- "It is expected that already a TW1 he has a good understanding of his product and writes about it in excellent English."

- I, a total Linux newbie, was sent to the RHCSA course only four months after my hiring as an intern.

- My two products so far: the Certificate System and Identity Management.

Life-support machine

- Is it possible?
    - Testing almost impossible → two workarounds:

        Workaround #1: focus on *conceptual* modules

        Workaround #2: focus on *textual gymnastics*

Thank you

II/ How have I overcome the difficulties?

- What have I learned about **surviving in a corporate environment**?

- What have I learned about **surviving as a technical writer**?

- What coping strategies have I used to **remain sane**?

What have I learned?

- **Patience**

- **Trusting one's instincts**

- **Being a good communicator**
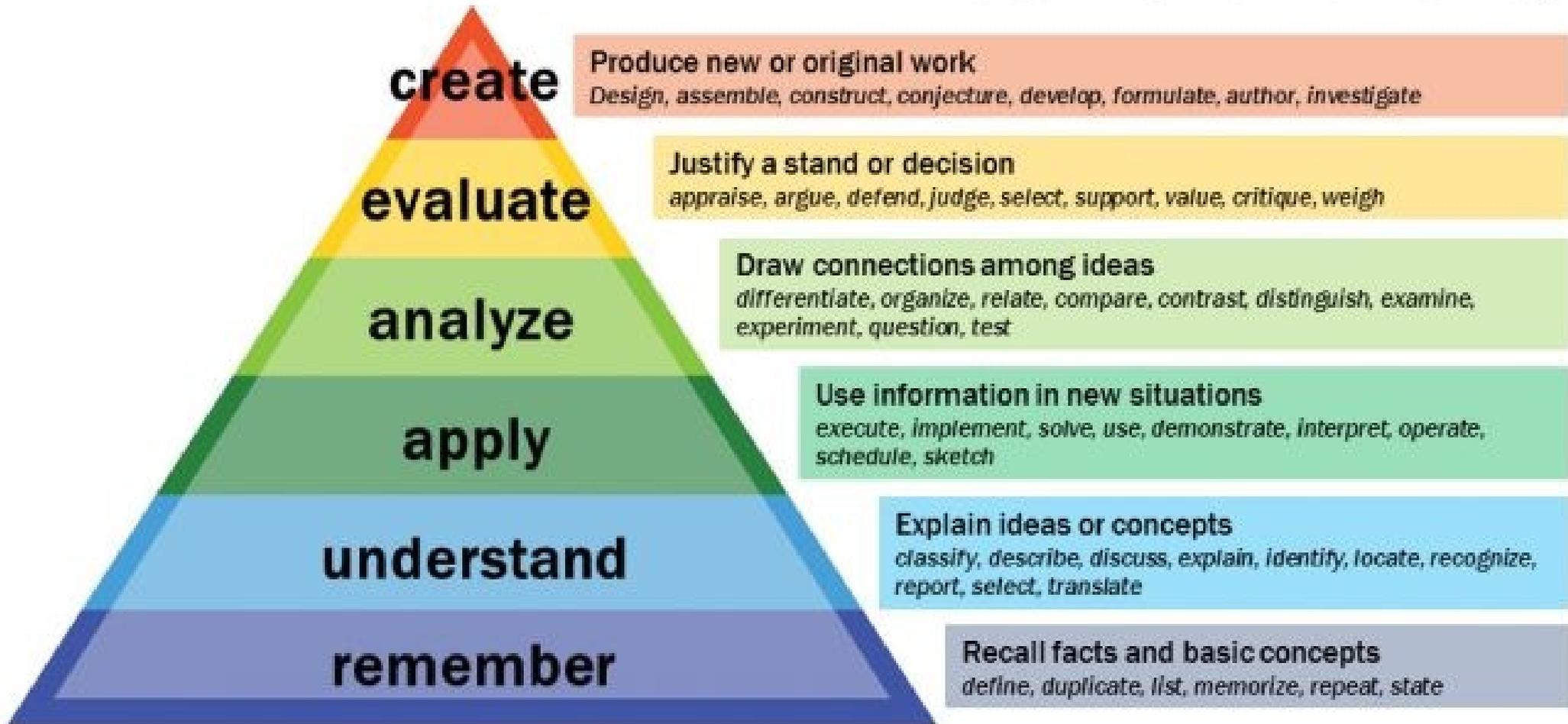
- **Perseverance**

- **Fight**

- Constructivism
    - Says that people **construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences**.
    - When we encounter something new, we have to **reconcile it with our previous ideas and experience,** maybe changing what we believe, or maybe discarding the new information as irrelevant. *(hence, analogies and comparisons are excellent!)*
    - We are **active creators** of our own knowledge. To [create our knowledge], we must ask questions, explore, and assess what we know. *(hence, interacting with the text is a must: adding questions and notes)*
    - **Evaluate** *what I have done/learned/what has worked, what hasn't.*

'Trust your instincts': Hierarchy of **cognitive learning objectives** according to their **complexity**

Bloom's Taxonomy

create
Produce new or original work
Design, assemble, construct, conjecture, develop, formulate, author, investigate

evaluate
Justify a stand or decision
appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, critique, weigh

analyze
Draw connections among ideas
differentiate, organize, relate, compare, contrast, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test

apply
Use information in new situations
execute, implement, solve, use, demonstrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch

understand
Explain ideas or concepts
classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize, report, select, translate

remember
Recall facts and basic concepts
define, duplicate, list, memorize, repeat, state

Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching

What helps me when tackling a difficult subject

- Saying/writing things in my own words (Bloom's 2nd layer - *understand*)
  - However imprecise, inadequate your rendering of what you have read in the docs/heard from the SME, it is important that you **make sense** of it for yourself, actively (re-)producing the meaning
  - If you're really tired, just **remembering** (Bloom's 1st layer) might be OK: at least you'll force yourself to spend more time with the subject → subconscious learning

- Apply the concepts to your personal reality/offline world (Bloom's 3rd layer - *apply*)
  - Use comparisons and analogies (offline meanings)

Writing a user story documenting a new feature

Ask the SME for a **consultation** (face-to-face, BJ)

→ **Read up** on the topic – e.g. a very basic man page. Do your homework (Bloom 1-3) try to get familiar with the subject what this is about, copy the existing docs to a **google document** and **add questions** where you perceive gaps, inconsistencies, lack of clarity (*constructivism*)

→ **Share** the gDoc in sufficient time before the meeting, giving the SME **editing rights**

→ **Record** the meeting. If it is a face-to-face meeting, use your mobile.

Writing a user story documenting a new feature II

→ The SME is likely to explain the feature **using his/her terminology**. However hard you try to make him/her use real-world analogies, s/he might not be able to 'make the leap' to your side. When you start feeling you don't have the vaguest idea of what the SME is talking about, insist on **going through the questions** in the gDoc together.
(example: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1LTYUJ-siZGKrC4BC492wm4orMIjTRWcD0yhfH9sP8OI/edit#)

→ **Write** the answers to the questions as the SME addresses them. This will make the SME **slow down** and you will have time to get your bearing back and even ask some **follow-up questions**.

→ After the meeting, if you have a feeling you still don't have a proper understanding, **go through the recording** over again. **Transcribe** parts that you think are important and that you don't understand. Force yourself to **go up Bloom's taxonomy** while doing that: write your own comments and questions next to the transcribed parts, using a different pen colour to distinguish your input from the SME's. (*constructivism* again)

→ **Sleep on it.** Then look at the text and your notes with fresh eyes and analyze, evaluate and create (use Bloom's higher cognitive processes). Mind maps can help a lot to obtain a **higher-level perspective**.

- If you still feel you have not ultimately grasped everything important about the subject, **do it the researcher + secretary way**. Your self-respect and health are more important than work.

- Otherwise: **start** with what you have **understood** best about the topic

- Be it a procedure or an introductory section explaining the concepts

- This will allow you to start writing '**officially**' soon; you will have produced a text which you will *just* keep expanding – yay!

- It will prevent you getting discouraged about the topic

Coping strategies

- Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize **stressful events**
  - **Write at least 4 emails every day**
  - **Keep a notebook**
  - **Daily scrum**
  - **Daily to-do list with both easy and challenging items**