

ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD – NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF BIOGRAPHY

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Abstract: About one and a half million Polish people suffer from a new phenomenon which is an Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome. It is connected with alcoholic disease of one, or both, parents. The aim of the research was to know better the biographies constructed created by the Adult Children of Alcoholics. Following research issues within the frames of the generally established aim were set: what sense of self-esteem do Adult Children of Alcoholics have? What role does a period of childhood play in the functioning of Adult Children of Alcoholics and present family life? What are the relations of Adult Children of Alcoholics with social environment? While looking for the answers for following questions the research method, which in fact belongs to the quality methodology, was chosen. It was method of individual cases, which used the interview technique. In the research a narrative interview, which was conducted by means of tape recorder, as the research tool, was applied. Application of narrative interview in the research let me have creative modifications and supplements. I made deliberate choice of interviewees (four women and six men). Due to the fact that the material obtained from interviews was vast, only narrative fragments reflecting “partial” image of biography of Adult Children of Alcoholics were used in the paper.

Keywords: Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome, alcoholic family, (un)happy childhood, social environment

1. Terminology explanation: Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome, alcoholic family

Adult Children of Alcoholics are people, who were brought up in families, in which alcohol was abused. When they were children, they had to grow up very quickly. Nowadays they are adults, but deep inside they remain children (Kucińska, 2006). Among therapists there is no consent concerning the definition of this syndrome. Team of experts, who help people with Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome, and work under supervision of the State Agency for the Prevention of Alcohol-Related Problems has elaborated three equal definitions concerning the Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome. Z. Soblewska-Melibruda presents the first of them. She points that *“the Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome is a complex of preserved individualistic schemes (cognitive, emotional, behavioural and interpersonal) of psychosocial functioning, which were formed in childhood in an*

alcoholic family, and which make it difficult for a person to have an adequate, direct contact with the present and have caused psychological closure in the past. It causes experiencing and interpreting the current events and relationships through the prism of painful experiences from childhood, what is not realized by Adult Children of Alcoholics. Such behaviours are destructive and cause a lot of disorders in patient's contact with themselves and other people, especially with those ones, with who they are in close relationship" (quotation of Wawerska-Kus, 2009, p. 20). The second definition is presented by A. Litwa, who states that "people with the Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome are adults, whose strength of record of traumatic events in families with addiction problem exceeded countermeasures of their defence system, leaving permanent traces in the image of themselves and functioning of a person, who has traits of complex post-traumatic stress reflected in varied configuration of personality traits" (quotation of Wawerska-Kus, 2009, p. 21). The third definition is provided by M. Kucińska, who states that "the Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome is a set of "rigid" traits of personality, which were formed in childhood and which make adaptation in the adult life and development of new traits of personality difficult. These traits are connected with compensatory strategies, which were used by a child for adaptation to experiences related to environment of adolescence and family. In adult life difficult situations may activate children's strategies of coping with stress" (2006, p. 32).

Adult Children of Alcoholics descend from alcoholic families, which are treated as dysfunctional ones and are characterized by four basic features: a) *It is a closed family* – it induces isolation, seclusion. Feeling of shame dominates in it. A child does not invite friends, he does not ask for help. The family protects the family "secret", as a treasure. Child's contacts with peers are more and more superficial and conventional. b) *It is a hypocritical family* – the inconvenient topic is omitted. The shame and fear make them lie even to each other (the members of the family do not talk with each other about alcohol, as if there was no problem), c) *Lack of reciprocity* – nobody helps anyone, everybody is an egoist and only thinks about himself. They do not support each other in difficult moments, or just the opposite there is overprotectiveness. Lack of reciprocity in the alcoholic family causes a sense of injustice, which accumulates for years, and causes loss of trust to people, feeling of worthlessness, d) *Rigid division of roles in the family* – general type of reaction to the world, "trained" defensive attitudes toward threats, which children experience while living with a person, who drinks and is more and more irresponsible alcoholics and the second parent, who is desperately and obsessively absorbed with having control over the alcoholic (Kozak, 2007). In such families the respondents were brought up. As M. Ziemska underlines – such families are "(...) cradle of many personality disorders, psychotherapy, neurosis and psychosomatic disorders (...)" (1973).

2. Methodological background (method, technique, research tool)

On account of established research issues, a review of literature concerning quality methodology was conducted, as it was recognized as the most appropriate for the undertaken research. Such statement can be justified by, for example the fact that "subjectivism understood as reaching beyond the "objective data" for interpretation, better understanding, giving new meanings is the feature of quality

researches” (Zaręba, 1998, p. 46). Data is presented in such a way, as it is seen (felt, assessed) by the Adult Child of Alcoholics, who at the same time is co-addicted (Zaręba, 1998). The quality research lets uncover and understand phenomena, which were unknown and hidden beyond main areas of research interest (Zaręba, 1998).

The aim of the research was to know better the biographies constructed by the Adult Children of Alcoholics. I set following research issues within the frames of the generally established aim: what sense of self-esteem do Adult Children of Alcoholics have? What role does the childhood period play in the functioning of Adult Children of Alcoholics and present family life? What are the relations of Adult Children of Alcoholics with social environment? While looking for the answer for asked questions I chose the research method, which in fact belongs to the quality methodology – it was method of individual cases, which used the interview technique. In the research I applied narrative interview, which was conducted by means of tape recorder, as the research tool. Application of narrative interview in the research let me have creative modifications and supplements (quotation of Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2006).

In the undertaken research I applied deliberate selection of interviewees because of the fact that there is reflection of some traits or processes, which interest us, in them (Silwerman, 2007). Ten speakers including four women and six men participated in the research. Their professions, education and age are presented in the table 1.

Table 1. Education, age, marital status and actual professions of speakers.

Name of interviewee	Age	Education	Profession	Marital status
Beata	27	Vocational education	Shop assistant in a shoe shop	divorced
Sabina	23	Student of the 3rd year of full time undergraduate studies	Unemployed	maiden
Ania	29	University education	Worker of the Tax Office	married
Jola	48	University education	Worker of the Health Care Centre	married
Leszek	50	Vocational education	Runs her own business	married
Waldek	56	Vocational education	Unemployed	divorced
Adam	23	Student of the 3rd year of full time undergraduate studies	Driving instructor	bachelor
Patryk	26	Vocational education	Worker of the garage	bachelor
Krzysztof	46	Vocational education	Worker of the electronic equipment	married
Rafał	25	Vocational education	barman	bachelor

Only narrative fragments reflecting “partial” image of biography constructed by the Adult Children of Alcoholics were used in this paper.

3. Adult Children of Alcoholics – sense of self-esteem

A family, in which there are various relations based on widely comprehended social and interpersonal communication, bears main responsibility for child’s development (Hurlo, 2010). Parents are the ones who shape their child’s personality. There arises a question whether the personality of a child in a family in which there

is alcohol abuse will be shaped correctly. A child, who is not accepted in a family, who is not noticed, or who is hurt, treats itself as a human suffering from neglect and harm, as human, who is abandoned and worthless. They enter the adult life with such conviction (Chojna, 2007). In order to confirm lack of self-acceptance, people with the Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome activate some forms of self-destruction. They refuse to have any rights for themselves, they assess themselves very strictly, or even cruelly, they have tendency to become addicted to some substances, to suffer from psychosomatic diseases, or eating disorders (Kucińska, 2002). For an Adult Child of Alcoholics life is a "ceaseless set of misfortunes" with only short periods of time without any problems. Such person does not have any chance to feel happy and have fun (Obuchowski, 2000). A person, who is "co-addicted" suffers from losing contact with oneself, alienation of one's own needs and feelings (Obuchowski, 2000).

The interviewees told about themselves, their attitude towards themselves and traits, which were moulded in "difficult" childhood, in such way: *"...Currently I consider myself, as a very calm person, but it did not use to be like that [...]. The life has changed me, especially my wife, and thanks to her I am, who I am. Without a moment's thought, I can enumerate positive traits of my character, and I know that I am a valuable man. I have a wonderful family, I love it, and they love me, we need each other, I have somebody for whom I want to live, and it is an amazing feeling. If it comes to my vices, I should "enumerate" irritability, as I have mentioned I am a very calm man, but.... It happens that sometimes I become nervous and a little bit later I completely do not understand, what was the reason of my anger. ... I am overprotective.... I would like to protect my family from failures, dangers and disappointment, which I have experienced in my childhood..."*

Referring to Leszek's statement, who as he said – "is a man of success" – one can say that only a "real" family can help in the moments of weakness, rupture, crisis. It can help to achieve a success – Leszek is such an example. *"... I have lost my life, I have achieved nothing and I realize that nothing good will happen in my life. Through my own stupidity I have lost that, what was the most important in my life and that is why I do not see any sense of my life. My wife was most important for me, she was somebody for whom I have lived, now I do not have anybody, who is dear to me, and I do not mean anything to anybody, I am alone. I am an alcoholic and I do not see any positive traits, which I could enumerate"* – Waldek's statement. Waldek – as it results from his statement – expects help, but is ashamed to ask for it.

Some interviewees, due to the lack of families and traumatic experiences from childhood aim at being recognized in the social environment. Such an example is Patryk (26 years old), who is talking about his "laboriousness": *"...My positive trait is foremost my laboriousness. I do not like idleness and boredom. I have to admit that I can be characterized by precision in tasks, which I do. I do not like mess, my all things are always in order. It irritates me very much, when somebody touches and moves my things, then I go into frenzy. Nervousness is my vice, I lose my temper easily. I am satisfied with who I am, although I would like to be more calm, I have problem with relaxing."*

Atmosphere was very tense during the interview with Patryk. The man was acting nervously, he used vulgarisms very often, and sometimes raised his voice.

“...I am not satisfied with who I am, it always appeared to me that people are deriving and laughing at me. I have always been a shy person, I have hidden my feelings and I really do not understand how did it happen that I have got married, although I love my wife very much and I am very happy with her.”

Krzysztof has a low sense of self-esteem despite love and support of his wife. This woman has been the only person in his life, who has shown interest in him. It can be stated that being so critical of himself is a result of lack of warmth and love in his home.

The next interviewee – Beata – has a negative attitude towards herself. *“... I have always felt worse, different and angry at whole world. I do not like myself, I do not like my body. I cannot define, what I feel, it is very difficult for me to understand it. I keep escaping from the problems, I convince myself that there are no problems, I know – I am pathetic...”*

As it can be noticed in the statement – the speaker is a person, who is self-contained, and the interview, which caused many problems to her, was stopped at her request many times. Beata has a very low sense of self-esteem, although she is a beautiful woman, she feels bad in her body – she needs help of a specialist.

Tomek, who is the next speaker, has similar self-esteem to Beata's one. *“I have always felt that I am different from my peers, I have tried not to quarrel with them, however there has not been chance of any close relationships. I have always felt best, when I was alone and I was far from my home. Now I know that I am important, but still it is difficult for me to feel it. I think that if I work on myself I can get off the tiger's back and have the ability to make the most out of life, I just need support.”*

Tomek is a person, who needs support and understanding, which he has not experienced in his childhood. During interview he said that he desired to find a woman, who would understand his problems and change his life.

The next speaker, who needs a specialist's help is Rafał, who can be characterized by lack of trust to people. *“... In every situation I persuade myself that people act against me, want to hurt me and laugh at me. Although I try to be nice, and in fact unnoticed, I have an impression that they know everything about my experience and they notice my otherness and they scoff at me. I am very sorry that it is, as it is, but I don't know how to change it. I just prefer to isolate from people.”*

As it can be seen, this speaker also has a very low sense of self-esteem, his psychological state is threatened. Rafał needs an immediate help.

The last statement concerning the sense of self-esteem is presented by the next interviewee – Sabina. *... I have no idea of who I really am. I feel lost in life. Not many things make me pleased. It is maybe my fault, as at home they kept on saying that I was nobody, I would not achieve anything, and I guess, I believed it. I am waiting for something that will change my life for better, I would like to feel that I live. Maybe I deserve just a little bit of happiness.*

“Summing up the interviewees' statements concerning their sense of self-esteem it can be noticed that nearly all of them have lowered sense of self-esteem and some of them have very low sense of self-esteem. Approach presented by them is result of unhappy childhood, which they experienced being brought up in families, in which there was problem of alcohol abuse. Some speakers have found support and help in their own families, which they managed to start. These persons believed in themselves, experienced “another”, better life, than this from their childhood.”

4. (Un)happy childhood - reports of the interviewees

Family is a basic social cell, a peculiar microsystem, and can be characterized by a specific, intimate nature of relations, dependencies, tasks, functions. Their result is unique atmosphere at home, sense of safety and right functioning of its members. For a child a family is a "matrix of ideals", of behaviours and actions. It constitutes an organized, clear and favourable system of values. The family of origin sets a mark, which to the end of life constitutes a reference point for many matters and decisions (Olearczyk, 2008).

Dysfunctional family, in which the most frequent problem is alcohol abuse, is not a perfect environment for the right process of socialization for children. It is a source of distress, background of tension and frustration. It is also a "set" of many accumulated factors, such as: criminal patterns of behaviours, aggressive behaviours, lack of positive exemplars in the attitude towards work and realization of social roles, applying of improper educational methods (inconsistency, rigorism), insufficient care and low level of parents' education, as well as low level of culture (Przybysz-Zaremba, 2006).

The statements of the interviewees confirm it fully: *"...When I was a child my father had problem with alcohol abuse, but he did not want to hear about rehab. He raised his hand against me and my brother very often, we always stood up for each other. Our mother, in turn, pretended that she did not see anything, and she never rose to our defence. He used physical violence and mental abuse, we hated him to such extent that we wished him death, I know that is awful, but it was like that. One day, when me and my brother were teenagers and we were strong enough to oppose him, we beat him and threw him away from house, and he has never come back, and we do not know what has happened to him. Mother was crying for a long time and she was blaming us that we did not have to do it that father was in fact a good man and he could change. I have hard feelings toward my mother because she contributed to the fact that our childhood looked in such way. At my wife's request I meet her sometimes on holidays, but I do not feel such need. I do not expect anything from her, I would never ask her for any kind of help. Our relations are very cold, I know that she is my mother, I do not wish her that something happens to her, but I will never forget her the harm she has done to me..."*

A father, as a person who used violence, and a mother who did nothing created environment, space for negative emotions, which are stuck in the speaker till nowadays. *"...My father was an alcoholic in my family house. I was ashamed of him, I thought that he was pathetic and disgusting, although he did not use physical violence or mental abuse I had a lot of hard feelings towards him. I and my mother had to look for him and bring him home very often. Because of that children were laughing at me at the play ground, and it is well-known that children can be cruel, I did not have too many friends in that period."*

The woman is in touch with both of her parents, although they are divorced and do not live together. Father tries to reward her difficult childhood, he gives her large amounts of money and buys expensive presents, which Ania takes with no hesitation, but she states that *"she will never forgive him humiliation, which she had to bear and nothing will reward it."* Ania has a very good contact with her mother.

Unhappy childhood was experienced by next speakers. It was also filled with fear, aggression and violence. *"...both of my parents were abusing alcohol, I*

remember only permanent rows. I was not noticed at home, my parents did not care what was happening with me.” – Waldek, 56 years old. “...I had difficult childhood, my father came back home drunk nearly every day and he was taking his anger out on my mother and me. Father hit me only once, I lost then consciousness, my younger sister attacked our father in my defence. Such incident did not repeat anymore, he has never raised his hand against me, maybe he was afraid that he can do harm to me. Moreover he treated mother like a dog as dogsbody, I do not understand why she did not divorce him. Every evening we were wondering with my sister, whether he would come back drunk again, and this waiting was terrible, we were always pretending that we were sleeping and then he usually left us alone. Nowadays my father tries to reward me for difficult childhood, he bought me a flat, a car and founded a driving school for me. Now he tries to be a good father, he has started to take interest in my life, he tries to fulfil my needs. I would like to forgive him, but I do not know if I can, or maybe I should not forgive him at all...”

Patryk spoke about what happened at his home reluctantly. In his voice one could hear anger and regret towards his parents. It is the story of Patryk’s childhood: *“...In my family house it was father, who abused alcohol, he came back home drunk very often, sometimes he disappeared for 3-4 days. I remember that mother was always crying, calling her friends, trying to find him. At first I was doing it with her, but later I came to the conclusion that it did not have any sense. When father came back home he was starting tremendous rows, he beat my mother, my brother and me. I was terribly scared of him, my brother in turn always defended me, I was not brave enough to defend him. We both were asking our mother to leave and divorce him. Mother kept saying that he would change that she would talk to him, but I think that she did not believe it herself. One day when he returned home drunk, he beat up mum...”*

Childhood of the next speaker was very difficult. She experienced emotional states characterized by tears, shouting, sometimes aggression while talking about it. *“...Father under influence of alcohol was excessively nice to me, he kept hugging me, stroking my head, whereas with mother it was the other way round, although she did not use physical violence, she was using mental abuse, she was repeating that I was nobody that I would achieve nothing in my life. It was terrible time, and luckily it is over me. My mother died 5 years ago, I did not go to the funeral and now I regret it. My father has got married second time, however we do not stay in touch.”*

Referring to the presented statements it can be claimed that an alcoholic family provides children with great distress, shame and humiliation. What a child learns (obtains) at the early stages of development in a family, has influence on their further, adult life. Unfortunately in an alcoholic family there is no chance of experiencing moments of pure happiness. Parents – alcoholics are not aware of the fact that process of socialization is commenced by conception and lasts to death (Przybysz-Zaremba, 2010).

5. Family life of Adult Children of Alcoholics

The period of (un)happy childhood experienced by Adult Children of Alcoholics left its trace on their adult life, on their own families. Some of Adult Children of Alcoholics started up their own families, in which problem of alcohol abuse is also present. Their partner or they became alcoholics, because of the fact that they did not have proper models of functioning in a family they started drinking. *"...My first wife was an alcoholic, but we will not talk about her. I have started drinking, because my wife persuaded me to do it, before I had hardly ever drunk. I drink only with her, and I limit myself to two, three drinks maximum. I do not feel need to drink, I just do it to accompany my wife."*

The next speaker is Ania, who was only 15 when she became pregnant with her current husband. She admits that it is possible that if there had not been pregnancy, they would not be together. *"A child has to have a father" – it was our parents' opinion and they made the decision about our wedding. For me it was wonderful, as I got the chance to leave my house finally, as we moved to my husband's parents and they are splendid people, thanks to them I graduated from school and started studies. ... We are just accustomed to each other, I have never felt need of closeness, but I suppose that my husband has. The most important is the fact that we live on good material level, my husband is a sailor, so he earns a lot, and very often he is not at home, and I like it, I do not miss him. I treat him like a "friend", and not the most important man in my life, however it is sufficient for me and I do not think that I could build other relations in the relationship with anybody, but my husband. I have never been a romantic, life has taught me to have my feet on the ground."*

The speakers statement leads to conclusion that her son is the only person she loves unconditionally. He has made her realize what love is. The speaker drinks alcohol, usually as she has said – "when husband comes back home – they drink alcohol at home twice or three times a week. *"...I like wine, my husband drinks only vodka, but I do not think that we have any problem with alcohol, everybody drinks, because you have to "relax" from time to time."*

The next speaker's marriage fell apart because of alcohol, which was abused by him. *"My problems with alcohol started after wedding. Although my wife was the most wonderful person I have ever met I could not stop drinking. I fell in love for the first time and it took me a lot of time to convince her to marry me. Our life was wonderful, we had everything, until the day when my wife noticed that my drinking turned into addiction. She gave me an ultimatum – either she, or alcohol. Naturally, I was promising that I would stop, would change, but I could not. My wife has left and - as I presumed it to be - my "ideal world" has collapsed. Everything has lost their importance, I have lost respect to myself. Today I do not count on anything, I drink everyday and I am waiting only for death..."*

Jola has been married for 16 years, however she does not feel happy. Her husband harasses her, he keeps saying that she is "too fat" and "ugly." Despite this she loves her husband very much and tries to do everything to be attractive to him. *"I have got a very weak character, I always gave in to my husband. Sometimes he shouts at me and calls me the worst names and in one moment he asks me to give him dinner, and I do it of course. I am at his back and call. My husband is a sober alcoholic after the therapy. He is a very nervous and bad tempered man. The worst is that he turns children against me. We have got two sons, who used to come to me*

with their problems, nowadays they talk only with their father and treat me like air. Sometimes I have got impression that they do not respect me at all. Despite having family I feel terrible emptiness and solitude, and it is becoming more and more difficult to cope with it."

The quoted statements of interviewees show that problem of alcoholism in childhood has influence on their own families, in which apart from alcohol there is often aggression, violence and lack of appropriate models given to children. People, who come from families in which problem of alcohol abuse was present, cannot free from emotional relationship with their families, even when growing up they leave family house and try to build their own life. This is caused by feelings and emotions from their childhood.

6. Adult Children of Alcoholics – relations with social environment – participation in the public life

An important element of functioning of the people with the Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome in society is their attitude to other people person and ability to form relations with them. People with the Adult Children of Alcoholics Syndrome are characterized by low level of self-acceptance, which results from being always witness of parent's rows, violence and aggression. These experiences have influence on their image of themselves, and their perception of the world, which is recorded in children brought up in families with problem with alcohol abuse as threatening and deprived of positive emotions. The closest people, who should be support and protection, became the biggest enemies and aggressors. Adult Children of Alcoholics perceive themselves as helpless and become objects of violence very often (Hellsten, 2009).

"...I have never been sociable and it was difficult for me to make friends. Some time ago it was important for me to have friends, but now it is the other way round, I do not need mercy, because what could be other reason of keeping in touch with me ..." – Waldek.

"All of my friends have turned their backs, I do not have friends anymore. Long time ago, when I was important for my husband, he used to spend a lot of time with me. I used to have a lot of friends, I met with them very often, but it started to disturb my husband, so I have broken off all contacts and now I have nobody. I feel like talking to someone, shedding tears very often, but there is nobody close to me. When it comes to contacts with co-workers I had to change my workplace once, because women with whom I worked distressed me and I could not withstand the atmosphere, so I have quit. Luckily I have very little contact with other workers at my current work. ... I do not care about contact with people, I have problems with myself, so why would I have to care about others, I just prefer to be unnoticed. I do not have any close relationships with anybody at my work, I just do what I am supposed to do and I go back home. ... I have an impression that I am "different" that is why I shun people, in the presence of strangers I feel fear and threat, most of time I spend in my "four walls". I do not like my job, and I do not like contacts with people either, but you have to earn your living. If I had such possibility I would prefer to work at home..."

"...I am type of a "home bird", I do not like parties, I do not feel need for making new friends, I prefer to find some task at home and spend time with my

girlfriend. When it comes to my job, maybe it is not my dream job, but I was an unemployed for a long time, and I am happy with what I have. I do not have any contacts with my co-workers, the staff changes frequently, so sometimes I do not have enough time to learn their names."

Statements of the speakers confirm that Adult Children of Alcoholics are characterized by having substantial problems in making contacts with the social environment. Adult Children of Alcoholics are usually typical "home birds", who shun people, and even live in constant fear among them. They are not able to establish emotional contacts, cannot speak about themselves and their needs, they cannot find a compromise between what they want and what do their partners want from them (Kucińska, 2003). They also are not able to listen. They have difficulties in speaking in a way that enables communication in order to solve problems or difficult situations. Inability to express what they feel, leads very often to unclear situations, which are basis for mutual resentments, grieves and "pretence" (Chojna, 2007).

7. Summary

The speakers, who were brought up in a family with problem with alcohol abuse, in which fear, aggression and violence dominated; in which there were negative models of parents and parenthood, can very often start up a similar family in their adult life and repeat their parents' mistakes. However, some of them do not make decision on entering the state of matrimony, because they are afraid that their relationship will be "same" as their parents'. In their opinion it is better, and foremost safer to live in an informal relationship or alone.

Because of the experience from their childhood, Adult Children of Alcoholics have very low sense of self-esteem, they do not trust themselves, as well as their perception and mental powers. They keep their relatives, acquaintances, social environment at distance – they are unable to communicate with them.

Summing it up, it has to be stated that a change of life of Adult Children of Alcoholics is only possible with aid of specialists, and also thanks to understanding by them the way in which current problems are bound with their adolescence in a family in which problem with alcohol abuse was present. The healing process requires exact and honest "observation" of former life and realizing, how has the past influenced their further life, and also realizing feelings, which they experienced in that time and accepting them.

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