

The High Council on Resurrection in Role-Playing Games

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Preamble to the Council

The great powers that have given us mortals the ability to wield magical energy have also made it possible for extremely skilled spellcasters to return the dead to a state of life. Four of our most famous incantations used to perform this miraculous task are those known as Raise the Dead, Spell of Reincarnation, Prayer of Resurrection, and the Greater Wish of the Archmagi. The High Council on Resurrection gathered to discuss the grave issues that this application of magical power raises.

There are many who have some stake in the matters of this discussion. There will always be more people dying untimely deaths than mighty magics to restore them. Not everyone, therefore, can return from death. Certain parties within our fair kingdom have noted that the wealthy and adventurous seem to be the greatest beneficiaries of this power. This raises ethical questions. Who should be allowed to come back to life? Who should be given the responsibility to make this choice? Is the wealth of the deceased an issue? How much should it cost to be restored from death? What rights do the risen have to their former property? Should rulers be allowed to reign indefinitely, as is certainly possible with a combination of rejuvenating and restorative magics?

The Sessions of the High Council

The High Council was composed of representatives from a variety of backgrounds. Most prevalent were the priesthoods espousing a just and orderly life, other priests promoting the right of the individual to seek his or her own way, and master wizards of the Academy. Also represented were the interests of the nobility and the wealthy, and adventurers of all stripes, from knights to assassins.

Each member participating in this discussion brought a unique viewpoint which provided a certain enlightenment to others who would listen. The Council was held in several sessions at politically neutral locations, to thereby encourage the participation of those who might otherwise be held in extreme contempt for their closely held views. This arrangement did, indeed, serve as it was meant. The results of our discussions were quite fruitful.

The Interests Represented

In a meeting of this magnitude and significance, one can be sure that deeply held values and beliefs will be exposed to the light of day, and will sway the thinking of the participants. That the gentle reader may more easily understand the meat of the discussion, I will here attempt to lay forth the principal positions and interests expressed by those who spoke in the High Council.

Those who espouse a Divine or Political Order: This interest was represented by the followers of several of our major religions and by members of the landed nobility. A principal concern of these participants was justice and the will of God. In their minds, resurrection is a very weighty matter, and one which should not be freely given under any circumstance. They also were in favor of establishing certain laws regarding property rights of the resurrected vis a vis inheritance. Adherents of this position often mentioned that having the power to resurrect individuals does not mean that it should be done and that, in many cases, the very attempt to return some person to life was an act of defiance of God's will. Others agreed in part, and suggested that the only legitimate reason for resurrection would be to prevent a great damage to faith, kingdom, or community. Priests of this persuasion often doubted the capacity for sound ethical judgement of wizards who had sufficient skill and power to restore life, as opposed to priests, who were supposed to have been trained in dealing with such moral and ethical quandaries.

Those who espouse the Right of Free Will: Members of the High Council who took this position were those representing faiths of individual autonomy, learned adventurers and wizards, and others who believe that the power of resurrection is a

tool without inherent moral purpose. The most important concern of this group was that the power not be “rationed” for the benefit of the wealthy or powerful. These members often seemed to view resurrection as “another chance” to succeed at life in general or some important task in particular. This group based most decisions upon specific circumstances and the judgement of the spellcaster performing the ritual. One consideration of this group was the recognition that the cause for restoration would have to be important enough to the spellcaster for him to accept the debilitating effects of such powerful magic upon his person.

Those who believe that the Power Should Not Be Used: There were several members of the High Council who firmly believed that the power of resurrection should not be used, and that it poses a drain on resources and an abrogation of the natural order of the universe. Additionally, some members of this group reminded the Council that death means that the soul continues on to its presumed reward or punishment and that we do a good soul such a cruelty to restore it to flesh that it represents an unconscionable act. Others regarded the ability to restore the dead to life as a temptation, and not as a benefit to mankind. A minority view within this position is that of the professional assassin who regarded resurrection as an affront to his personal and professional competency, and stated that “the dead should remain dead.”

Those who believe that the power is like Any Other Scarce Resource: Several noteworthy merchants and nobles present for the High Council’s discussions responded that resurrection is simply another type of very rare ability, and should be treated as such without distracting moral or ethical concerns, which do not properly apply anyway. Arguments for this position point out that magic is a natural force, albeit a mystical and supernatural one, that exists in the universe independent of mankind. Priests should abide by their religious doctrines, certainly, but wizards are free to use the power as they see fit. It would be appropriate to charge a fee in cash, goods, lands, or service commensurate with the value and rarity of the service rendered. Also, the spellcaster would benefit from the fee charged. Religious orders could use the fees to aid the poor and to spread the word of such good deeds as they do. Adherents of this position do not believe that the power should be rationed or restricted by artificial constraints, because it is already limited by the rarity of people with the ability and the physical cost of casting this type of spell.

Discussions on the Manner of Death

To many of the participants of the High Council, it seemed that how the person died was an important consideration in the decision of whether or not to resurrect him from death. Some of this was based upon the principle of “greatest potential for good,” in which the spellcaster was obliged to use his power for the benefit of those who were most likely to contribute the most to the world if they were restored. Conflicting with this principle was the belief that it is impossible to accurately judge the relative worth of individual human beings (and related others). With this cautionary note in mind, I present several of the major cases addressed.

Death by Natural Causes: This death is defined as that of old age, incurable disease, sickness, infirmity, or other reason having no actor outside the person’s self. In all cases (except for a rare case in which the power or resurrection flows freely and without cost to the priest), the Council members agreed that this sort of death was generally of the type that should not be reversed by magical resurrection. The rationale behind this argument was generally that diseases should have been cured earlier at a lesser cost and that most of the people dying in this way would have lived their lives out as God or Fate had decreed.

Death by Accident: This is defined as unintentional death through an outside force, such as falling down stairs, drowning, being thrown from a horse, or being crushed by an overturned load of cargo. This category of death was deemed to be worthy of resurrection by many members of the Council. This was seen as an untimely end not caused by poor judgement, and therefore permissible to remedy through magic.

Death by Murder: Defined as death intentionally caused by another individual or individuals, most members of the Council agreed that resurrection would be appropriate if the death was unjust. This category includes assassination, poisoning, ambush, warfare, adventuring, and other violent ends. The rationale underpinning this argument is that a person should not have his life taken away unjustly. Those who could have avoided death through better judgement or actions or were justly slain were not regarded as being worthy of restoration.

Death by Preventable Misadventure: The High Council members often held in poor regard those who could have prevented their own deaths through reasonable caution. Adventuring for profit was viewed as “walking the thin line of preventable misadventure” by most Council members who were not themselves adventurers. If the deceased could have prevented his own death, he should have, and is therefore ineligible for resurrection. This mode of death caused the most disagreement, since its definition relies heavily upon the judgement of others who no firsthand knowledge of the situation that caused the person’s death.

Discussions on the Death of Types of Individuals

As one might imagine, the participating members of the High Council often regarded certain classes or categories of people as being more or less worthy than others of the inestimable benefits of such powerful magic. Again, the “greatest potential for good” principle was a strong consideration, as were the beliefs of particular religions or faiths.

The Aged: The Council generally regarded older people as having lived much of their possible allotment of life, and therefore as less deserving of resurrection. Many felt that it would be a waste to restore someone who would shortly die again anyway.

The Ignoble: Villains who display no regard for the common weal were seen as undeserving of resurrection, regardless of the manner of death. A dissenting point of view was raised by those who felt that sufficient money should be able to buy resurrection. Generally, however, the Council members felt that the potential to contribute to the world was quite low for this lot.

The Young: Council members regarded the young as having died before their time, and therefore deserving of another chance at life. Most felt that the potential to contribute was quite high for these people. A dissenting view was posed by adherents of religions which regarded children before the age of decision as innocent, destined directly for divine reward. These members regarded the raising of dead children as an unbearable punishment for the child.

The Wealthy: All else being equal, the wealthy and powerful have more to contribute, both to the spellcaster and to the world at large. Thus, they were regarded as potentially more deserving of resurrection than the multitudinous poor. One argument mentioned, “It is easier to replace a farmer than a prince.”

The Heroic: Most Council members agreed that skilled heroes had a great deal to contribute to the world if restored and generally regarded them as eligible for resurrection. Some, however, reminded the Council of the dishonor of stealing a proper “Hero’s Death” from the valiant fallen. If the hero had an important unfinished quest which could not be completed by another, most members felt that it would be appropriate to return him to life.

The Devout: The members of the High Council felt that resurrection could be fairly restricted to devout members of the spellcaster’s own faith. Indeed, spells cast upon unbelievers often fail. An alternative viewpoint argued that those who held different beliefs, but were true to them, were equally worthy of restoration.

Recommendations of the High Council

Over the course of the sessions of the Council, the participating members created a set of guidelines for the responsible use of the power of resurrection and similar magics. The gentle reader should in no way construe these guidelines to be unanimously accepted by all participants, nor should one believe that these humble thoughts can address all situations. Rather, they offer a suggestion for the ways in which this awe-inspiring ability may be used for the benefit of society, and act as a theory for right action in the hands and hearts of master wizards and high priests.

The Guidelines

1. Consider carefully the effect that restoring this, or any, person will have upon the world. It is quite possible that this death was meant to be and that an attempt to change it would anger higher powers. There is no need to use the power of resurrection indiscriminately, or to use all of the power given to a spellcaster for any reason. If this death was meant to be then let it stand. Death is, after all, a natural part of life.
2. If this person died an untimely death, and has much yet to accomplish in the world, consider using the power of resurrection to restore him. If his death was natural or just, let it stand.
3. If this person died through foolish actions or poor judgement, consider whether he will learn from his experience or remain a fool. There is no wisdom in bringing yet another fool into the world.
4. Consider the life of this person. Was he a devout follower of the faith? Was he unswervingly true to his beliefs? What has he done to deserve the benefits of renewed life? If he has not made something good of himself, it may not be wise to return him to this world.
5. Will the restoration of this person bring a benefit to the world? What recompense must he pay in wealth or service for his life? Is he truly worth the cost of the magic? Those who are not likely to contribute much to the world or to society should often be left in peace, as are those who have earned their rest.

6. If, after consideration, you decide to attempt to repair this person's soul to his body, then you must accept a certain responsibility for your actions before the higher power that you serve. The final decision to cast the spell lies with you, the caster. Power of this nature is not given to the inexperienced or rash. It is meant (if it is meant at all) to be used wisely and according to the strictest interpretation of your code of belief. Use the power as it was intended, and be well.

These guidelines must, of course, be modified to fit the particular beliefs of the caster's faith. They have, however, been accepted by the Crown for the legal purposes of our fair kingdom. The application of these guidelines leads to the implications they pose for certain questions asked of the participants of the High Council.

The Implications of Resurrection and the Answers

These guidelines, or principles, established by the High Council on Resurrection, address some of the questions we originally asked the members in the Preamble to the Council sessions. The guidelines address who should be allowed to return from death, and how the spellcaster must take the responsibility for making the decision. The decision to restore life is not one to be made lightly, as the guidelines demonstrate.

Resurrection is a great gift of life. None of the members of the Council felt that it should be freely given. Each stated that he or she believed that the restored person must pay a debt of wealth or service to the spellcaster or his faith. Most of the Council members felt that the amount of the fee should be based upon the recipient's ability to pay. In essence, they asked, "What is your life worth to you?" Those who have more should pay more than those who have less. With few exceptions, however, the ability to pay was not a consideration in whether or not the caster should perform the ritual. Most established priesthoods recommended combining a substantial fee of wealth and a debt of service to the faith as being appropriate.

Concerning property rights of the recently restored, Council members felt that the person himself must legally be considered his own closest next of kin. Some members recommended a statutory "stay of distribution" of inheritance within which time the deceased could reclaim his property. After such time expired, the person would have no more claim upon his former goods and chattels. The time limit recommended for the "stay of distribution" was one year. The Council recommended that in no case should property gained by the unjust death of another be retained if that person were restored to the living. It should not profit a person that another has died needlessly.

One of the most important questions posed to the Council was whether or not a ruler should be allowed to reign indefinitely through the use of rejuvenating and restorative magic. The Council generally felt that even kings have a certain predestined time to leave this earth, and that the guidelines should apply to all equally firmly, especially since the caster must use wisdom in deciding whether or not to cast the spell. Kings, therefore, live as long as they are able, and no longer.

The guidelines proposed by the members of the High Council should serve to aid in the decisions of how and if to allocate the special powers of resurrection. Although many questions have been put to rest, others will continue to nag at the conscience of each wise and powerful spellcaster. It is our hope that this Council has established some clarity for the benefit of those who will make these decisions, and to explain why all cannot be resurrected. In fact, one of the arguments against using the power of resurrection is that it is better to teach people how to grieve and accept loss than to hold out a false hope of continued physical existence. If I have provided our gentle readers with some grains of wisdom, then I will have achieved the Crown's purpose in establishing this High Council. In any case, I humbly thank each participant in the Council and reader of this folio for his or her kindness. I will conclude with the following thought, as it may provide some thought to the reader.

"Consider whether the power to restore the dead to life might not be a certain ultimate test of wisdom and faith. Can we truly say that it is for the benefit of the raised individual, or might the choices it requires not instead be a way for God to judge the worthiness of His creation?"

Most Humbly,

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Author's Note: This article came out of a long standing curiosity with the implications of life restoring magic in my RPG campaigns. As the gamemaster, I had the king of Landers, which is the principal nation in my Saltwave campaign, sponsor a High Council of this nature some time ago. My players provided input, but we didn't really develop the idea further until the spring of 1995, when I ran two sessions of the Council as roleplaying discussions at Twin Con 95. The participant discussions, combined with previous player comments, produced the concordance you may find in this article.

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