How you feel about the sanctions Ohio State self-imposed on head football coach Jim Tressel says a lot about how you feel about giving someone the benefit of the doubt and the context in which that benefit of doubt is earned.

We live in a world of cynicism so profound and widespread that at this point there is no transgression too large or too small that doesn't deserve the most sever of punishments, unless of course it was a transgression committed by Charlie Sheen, then we just laugh and follow him on Twitter.

That's what makes it hard anymore to bring perspective to any situation as nuanced as most really are. It's far easier and fits more perfectly in the 24/7 news cycle to examine issues from the vantage point of black or white, find the easy conclusion and then move on to the next great scandal. And believe me, there will be a next scandal. There always is.

But if we actually want to pause for a moment and consider Tressel's situation, we might then find out a little about ourselves.

Tressel admitted in his statement and the OSU press conference that what he did was wrong. He didn't hide behind a carefully crafted press release by the university's communication's department. He walked up to the podium, sribbled notes in hand, and proceeded to speak from his heart. He apologized for his behavior. He didn't ask for or seek pity. He talked about his own

need to grow from a teachable moment.

That apology is never going to be good enough for a whole host of people, from the professional cynics to the the Buckeye haters. Part of the reason resides in their own cynicism and parochialism but part of it resides in the fact that as a people, we don't much care for apologies. Despite how rarely people are actually willing to apologize for anything we nevertheless treat actual apologies like Enron stock—worthless.

So we move on to the next step and listen to the why to satisfy our curiosity on our way to dishing out the severe punishment that makes us feel better about ourselves. Tressel said that sometime in April he received a couple of emails from an attorney who identified two current players as possibly being implicated in an on-going federal investigation into drug trafficking. The author of those emails asked for confidentiality, apparently so that the investigation wouldn't be compromised. Tressel decided to honor that request. In a nutshell, that was the mistake from which everything else flows.

Now the professional cynics and Buckeye haters among us will see that not so much as an explanation but as an excuse, a poor one at that, one designed to preserve an upcoming run at another Big 10 title and possible national championship. Frankly a lot of people who don't fall into either category will probably feel the same way.

To too many there really is no difference between an explanation and an excuse anymore, which is why we fail to see the gray that exists in almost every situation. It is far more convenient and certainly more expedient to take an explanation and equate it to an excuse because it creates still another opportunity to punish the wrongdoer and make us feel even that much better and that much more superior.

And that's the real issue here, the proper punishment. If there is one thing you can count on in this whole mess is that everyone will have an opinion on whether or not the sanctions OSU imposed are good enough. Well, are they?

This takes us right back where we started. How you really feel about the penalty imposed depends mightily on whether or not you believe Tressel and, by extension, anyone else, ever deserves the benefit of the doubt.

Tressel does deserve the benefit of the doubt and not just because of what he's accomplished on the field, although honestly that's part of it. Mostly it's because of every other aspect of the way the man conducts his life. He's not a habitual offender at anything except, perhaps, corniness. He is a man of passion and integrity who has done everything anyone could possibly ask of someone in his position. And yes, people of integrity do make mistakes. Let us never forget that most salient of points.

Let's be clear, though, that giving Tressel the benefit of the doubt is not the same thing as disregarding his misconduct. It's importance is in assessing the proper punishment, finding that right blend of sanction and rehabilitation.

It's easy sure to look back at this whole matter and cynically suggest that Tressel wasn't driven by a quest to do the right thing but a quest to achieve greatness on the football field. But that cynical suggestion belies the facts that make up the whole of Tressel's life. It's easy to think that no one these days is pure of motive and most certainly no head coach of a major college football program could ever be so pure. Tressel? He's just like the rest of them, a greedy, win-obsessed coach who recruits on the fringes and cuts every corner.

Yea, that sounds exactly like the Tressel Ohio has known for the last 30 years.

But of course none of that will stop the professional cynics and haters among us who won't be satisfied with any penalty short of permanent banishment and the forfeiture of every win over the last 10 years, especially that game against Miami that Ohio State didn't deserve to win anyway.

I'm disappointed that Tressel got himself in this position. He owed it to everyone, from his players to the university administration and to the fans, to fall back on the vast resources at his disposal and ask some questions about what course of conduct he should have taken.

That said, I have no pause in standing firmly with Tressel on this matter. I take him at his word because, frankly, I have no reason to doubt it. He made a mistake, a serious mistake. But he didn't commit a capital crime and shouldn't be punished like a capital criminal. He's not perfect and never claimed to be. Me either.

This isn't a proud moment for Tressel or the university, but to throw him out with the bathwater would be tantamount to completely dismissing all of the proud moments and great accomplishments, both on and off the field, that Tressel has brought this university and its community.

Tressel will learn from this situation. And, hopefully, so will the rest of us.