The death of former Penn State football head coach Joe Paterno is a reminder, if nothing else, of how complicated life really can be.

In most respects, Paterno lived a life worth emulating. In other ways, though, he became a tragic figure with the fatal flaw of not knowing exactly when to say when.

In a tribute broadcast by ESPN, Jeremy Schaap pulled out a revealing Paterno quote to explain why he hung on for as long as he did. Paterno said he wouldn't retire because of Paul "Bear" Bryant, the long time head coach at Alabama. Mere weeks after retiring from Alabama, Bryant suffered a massive heart attack and died, having lost, apparently the will to live once his coaching days ended.

And so it was with Paterno. He stayed long past his sell date for the most understandably selfish reason of all: he feared his own death. Despite a loving and devoted family, including 5 children and 17 grandchildren; despite a legacy of accomplishment and philanthropy; despite, really, having squeezed as much life into his decaying frame as humanely possible, Paterno refused to retire because the loss of the one thing that sustained him above all others would kill him.

In the end, we'll never know if that's true though we certainly have every reason to believe that his firing and the loss of the only job he ever really knew, coupled with the awful circumstances surrounding it, sapped Paterno of any remaining fight left in his body. His advanced age and broken spirit prevented him from taking on the vestiges of a supposedly mild form of lung cancer, to which he succumbed mere weeks after its diagnosis.

The last interview that Paterno ever gave, with Sally Jenkins of the Washington Post, revealed a man who was seemingly at peace with the conflicts inherent in his legacy. He certainly did not come across as evil. But neither did he come across as any more aware of the truly awfulness of the situation at his beloved university and his role in allowing it to metastasize.

Paterno admitted he didn't know how to handle the situation and that's why he went to his bosses. It all sounded reasonable if not conveniently naïve. Paterno really had no bosses, only figureheads that had absolutely no power to control the institution within the institution that Paterno eventually became.

Paterno had long since stopped listening to his bosses anyway about how to handle problems within his football program. As the Sports Illustrated expose details, Paterno worked tirelessly to keep any misbehaving players from being punished within the context of the general university population. Having created a "we take care of our own" culture within the team, it was hardly a surprise really that Paterno's bosses did nothing about the Jerry Sandusky allegations. If Paterno was punting, which he was, why wouldn't they? It was, likely to their warped thinking, just a football team matter.

Now that he has passed on, there will be even further re-examining of this tragic situation in the context of the greater good that Paterno accomplished in his life. The construct of the argument advanced is whether one "incident" should wipe out nearly 5 decades of positive contributions.

It doesn't but not because Paterno's death demands a re-examination of the judgment rendered just a few months ago. It doesn't because the question as posed is a false one because the answer isn't one or the other. Paterno, was every bit as complicated and conflicted as the rest of us. Iconic status and coaching achievements don't give anyone a pass at the more difficult aspects of what we all face on a day to day basis and in the end they didn't give Paterno a pass either, nor should they.

Running a major college football program, these days or any days, is not a task for the feint of heart or the weak of mind. Paterno could come across paternalistic in the best sense of the word but he also had enough guile to honor his Brooklyn roots well.

He didn't want the university disciplining his players because that discipline could cost him a victory or two. Far better for him to have the players run laps or whatever other form of antiquated punishment Paterno could conger up then kick them off the team or out of the university. A coach that doesn't win is an ex-coach.

Paterno saw football glory as a means to a better end for the university as a whole because the riches it brought did indeed enhance the overall educational experience for everyone on campus. And Paterno honored that goal with his time, his talents and his pocketbook.

But let's not lose sight of the fact that Paterno was using the ends to justify the means. He wasn't a cheater, like the Jackie Sherills and the Barry Switzers of the world, both of whom Paterno despised. That doesn't mean though that Paterno didn't cut his share of corners or manipulate the circumstances with his well earned clout in order to serve some short term needs. He did. That's life.

Paterno's story, his rise, his fall from grace, the constant reexamination, is the same really that has played out with Ohio State's Jim Tressel, if only on a lesser scale and without the tragic ending.

Like Paterno, Tressel had gained a healthy dose of clout within a major university setting as a result of nearly unprecedented success on the football field. That success raised the profile and the bank account of the university. It enabled Tressel to use that clout for much good but he was always more cagey then most wanted to acknowledge. Did Tressel use that clout to achieve some short term gains? Probably, but that shouldn't surprise.

Tressel's explanation for his lack of response to the tattoo situation was understandable only in the context of understanding Tressel as the same kind of complex figure as Paterno. He wanted to do right by his players and his program and the university and ultimately hoped it would all sort of work out without any real repercussions.

But Tressel, like Paterno, fell to the forces of convenient outrage that only want to see every issue as a black or white choice until, of course, those same forces are faced with their own complex challenges.

It was never a question whether Tressel was a good man or not. He was. His downfall, just like Paterno's, was that his god-like image that he helped cultivate ultimately caused those around him to punish him more harshly for his transgressions then if he had just been more upfront about his sure humaneness.

Any sort of tragedy causes a bit of self reflection in everyone else. Ultimately, though, with Paterno as with Tressel, most doing the reflecting will struggle to see the real point. It's not that either was actually less then the sum of their parts. It's that both were fully the some of their parts. Life is never paint-by-numbers and it is possible, indeed entirely reasonable, that a person can be both good and bad at the same time.

It was true for Paterno, certainly, and true for Tressel as well. If we're being honest with ourselves, as situations like these call for, then let's all admit, too, that it's also true for the rest of us. And perhaps that is the best lesson for us all to learn.