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To My Partners:

Over the past eleven years, I have consistently set forth as the BPL investment goal an average advantage in our performance of ten percentage points per annum in comparison with the Dow Jones Industrial Average. Under the environment that existed during that period. I have considered such an objective difficult but obtainable.

The following conditions now make a change in yardsticks appropriate:

1. The market environment has changed progressively over the past decade, resulting in a sharp diminution in the number of obvious quantitatively based investment bargains available;
2. Mushrooming interest in investment performance (which has its ironical aspects since I was among a lonely few preaching the importance of this some years ago) has created a hyper-reactive pattern of market behavior against which my analytical techniques have limited value;
3. The enlargement of our capital base to about \$65 million when applied against a diminishing trickle of good investment ideas has continued to present the problems mentioned in the January, 1967 letter; and
4. My own personal interests dictate a less compulsive approach to superior investment results than when I was younger and leaner.

Let's look at each of these factors in more detail.

The evaluation of securities and businesses for investment purposes has always involved a mixture of qualitative and quantitative factors. At the one extreme, the analyst exclusively oriented to qualitative factors would say, "Buy the right company (with the right prospects, inherent industry conditions, management, etc.) and the price will take care of itself." On the other hand, the quantitative spokesman would say, "Buy at the right price and the company (and stock) will take care of itself." As is so often the pleasant result in the securities world, money can be made with either approach. And, of course, any analyst combines the two to some extent - his classification in either school would depend on the relative weight he assigns to the various factors and not to his consideration of one group of factors to the exclusion of the other group.

Interestingly enough, although I consider myself to be primarily in the quantitative school (and as I write this no one has come back from recess - I may be the only one left in the class), the really sensational ideas I have had over the years have been heavily weighted toward the qualitative side where I have had a "high-probability insight". This is what causes the cash register to really sing. However, it is an infrequent occurrence, as insights usually are, and, of course, no insight is required on the quantitative side - the figures should hit you over the head with a baseball bat. So the really big money tends to be made by investors who are right on qualitative decisions but, at least in my opinion, the more sure money tends to be made on the obvious quantitative decisions.

Such statistical bargains have tended to disappear over the years. This may be due to the constant combing and recombining of investments that has occurred during the past twenty years, without an economic convulsion such as that of the '30s to create a negative bias toward equities and spawn hundreds of new bargain securities. It may be due to the new growing social acceptance, and therefore usage (or maybe it's vice versa - I'll let the behaviorists figure it out) of takeover bids which have a natural tendency to focus on bargain issues. It may be due to the exploding ranks of security analysts bringing forth an intensified scrutiny of issues far beyond what existed some years ago. Whatever the cause, the result has been the virtual disappearance of the bargain issue as determined quantitatively - and thereby of our bread and butter. There still may be a few from time to time. There will also be the occasional security where I am really competent to make an important qualitative judgment. This will offer our best chance for large profits. Such instances will, however, be rare. Much of our good performance during the past three years has been due to a single idea of this sort.

The next point of difficulty is the intensified interest in investment performance. For years I have preached the importance of measurement. Consistently I have told partners that unless our performance was better than average, the money should go elsewhere. In recent years this idea has gained momentum throughout the investment (or more importantly, the investing) community. In the last year or two it has started to look a bit like a tidal wave. I think we are witnessing the distortion of a sound idea.

I have always cautioned partners that I considered three years a minimum in determining whether we were "performing". Naturally, as the investment public has taken the bit in its teeth, the time span of expectations has been consistently reduced to the point where investment performance by large aggregates of money is being measured yearly, quarterly, monthly, and perhaps sometimes even more frequently (leading to what is known as "instant research"). The payoff for superior short term performance has become enormous, not only in compensation for results actually achieved, but in the attraction of new money for the next round. Thus a self-generating type of activity has set in which leads to larger and larger amounts of money participating on a shorter and shorter time span. A disturbing corollary is that the vehicle for participation (the particular companies or stocks) becomes progressively less important - at times virtually incidental - as the activity accelerates.

In my opinion what is resulting is speculation on an increasing scale. This is hardly a new phenomenon; however, a dimension has been added by the growing ranks of professional (in many cases formerly quite docile) investors who feel they must “get aboard”. The game is dignified, of course, by appropriate ceremonies, personages and lexicon. To date it has been highly profitable. It may also be that this is going to be the standard nature of the market in the future. Nevertheless, it is an activity at which I am sure I would not do particularly well. As I said on page five of my last annual letter,

"Furthermore, we will not follow the frequently prevalent approach of investing in securities where an attempt to anticipate market action overrides business valuations. Such so-called 'fashion' investing has frequently produced very substantial and quick profits in recent years (and currently as I write this in January). It represents an investment technique whose soundness I can neither affirm nor deny. It does not completely satisfy my intellect (or perhaps my prejudices), and most definitely does not fit my temperament. I will not invest my own money based upon such an approach – hence, I will most certainly not do so with your money."

Any form of hyper-activity with large amounts of money in securities markets can create problems for all participants. I make no attempt to guess the action of the stock market and haven't the foggiest notion as to whether the Dow will be at 600, 900 or 1200 a year from now. Even if there are serious consequences resulting from present and future speculative activity, experience suggests estimates of timing are meaningless. However, I do believe certain conditions that now exist are likely to make activity in markets more difficult for us for the intermediate future.

The above may simply be "old-fogeyism" (after all, I am 37). When the game is no longer being played your way, it is only human to say the new approach is all wrong, bound to lead to trouble, etc. I have been scornful of such behavior by others in the past. I have also seen the penalties incurred by those who evaluate conditions as they were - not as they are. Essentially I am out of step with present conditions. On one point, however, I am clear. I will not abandon a previous approach whose logic I understand (although I find it difficult to apply) even though it may mean foregoing large and apparently easy, profits to embrace an approach which I don't fully understand, have not practiced successfully and which, possibly, could lead to substantial permanent loss of capital.

The third point of difficulty involves our much greater base of capital. For years my investment ideas were anywhere from 110% to 1000% of our capital. It was difficult for me to conceive that a different condition could ever exist. I promised to tell partners when it did and in my January, 1967 letter had to make good on that promise. Largely because of the two conditions previously mentioned, our greater capital is now something of a drag on performance. I believe it is the least significant factor of the four mentioned, and that if we were operating with one-tenth of our present capital our performance would be little better. However, increased funds are presently a moderately negative factor.

The final, and most important, consideration concerns personal motivation. When I started the partnership I set the motor that regulated the treadmill at "ten points better than the DOW". I was younger, poorer and probably more competitive. Even without the three previously discussed external factors making for poorer performance. I would still feel that changed personal conditions make it advisable to reduce the speed of the treadmill. I have observed many cases of habit patterns in all activities of life, particularly business, continuing (and becoming accentuated as years pass) long after they ceased making sense. Bertrand Russell has related the story of two Lithuanian girls who lived at his manor subsequent to World War I. Regularly each evening after the house was dark, they would sneak out and steal vegetables from the neighbors for hoarding in their rooms; this despite the fact that food was bountiful at the Russell table. Lord Russell explained to the girls that while such behavior may have made a great deal of sense in Lithuania during the war, it was somewhat out of place in the English countryside. He received assenting nods and continued stealing.

He finally contented himself with the observation that their behavior, strange as it might seem to the neighbors, was really not so different from that of the elder Rockefeller.

Elementary self-analysis tells me that I will not be capable of less than all-out effort to achieve a publicly proclaimed goal to people who have entrusted their capital to me. All-out effort makes progressively less sense. I would like to have an economic goal which allows for considerable non-economic activity. This may mean activity outside the field of investments or it simply may mean pursuing lines within the investment field that do not promise the greatest economic reward. An example of the latter might be the continued investment in a satisfactory (but far from spectacular) controlled business where I liked the people and the nature of the business even though alternative investments offered an expectable higher rate of return. More money would be made buying businesses at attractive prices, then reselling them. However, it may be more enjoyable (particularly when the personal value of incremental capital is less) to continue to own them and hopefully improve their performance, usually in a minor way, through some decisions involving financial strategy.

Thus, I am likely to limit myself to things which are reasonably easy, safe, profitable and pleasant. This will not make our operation more conservative than in the past since I believe, undoubtedly with some bias, that we have always operated with considerable conservatism. The long-term downside risk will not be less; the upside potential will merely be less.

Specifically, our longer term goal will be to achieve the lesser of 9% per annum or a five percentage point advantage over the Dow. Thus, if the Dow averages -2% over the next five years, I would hope to average +3% but if the Dow averages +12%, I will hope to achieve an average of only +9%. These may be limited objectives, but I consider it no more likely that we will achieve even these more modest results under present conditions than I formerly did that we would achieve our previous goal of a ten percentage point average annual edge over the Dow. Furthermore, I hope limited objectives will make for more limited effort (I'm quite sure the converse is true).

I will incorporate this new goal into the Ground Rules to be mailed you about November 1, along with the 1968 Commitment Letter. I wanted to get this letter off to you prior to that mailing so you would have ample time to consider your personal situation, and if necessary get in touch with me to clear up some of the enclosed, before making a decision on 1968. As always, I intend to continue to leave virtually all of my capital (excluding Data Documents stock), along with that of my family, in BPL. What I consider satisfactory and achievable may well be different from what you consider so. Partners with attractive alternative investment opportunities may logically decide that their funds can be better employed elsewhere, and you can be sure I will be wholly in sympathy with such a decision.

I have always found behavior most distasteful which publicly announces one set of goals and motivations when actually an entirely different set of factors prevails. Therefore, I have always tried to be 100% candid with you about my goals and personal feelings so you aren't making important decisions pursuant to phony proclamations (I've run into a few of these in our investment experience). Obviously all the conditions enumerated in this letter haven't appeared overnight. I have been thinking about some of the points involved for a long period of time. You can understand, I am sure, that I wanted to pick a time when past goals had been achieved to set forth a reduction in future goals. I would not want to reduce the speed of the treadmill unless I had fulfilled my objectives to this point.

Please let me know if I can be of any help in deciphering any portion of this letter.

Cordially,
Warren E. Buffett