MID-CAP VALUE

MARKET COMMENTARY

In 2020, investors witnessed the devastating impact of a worldwide pandemic on the global economy. While the effect was severe, investors perceived it as a transitory event, and recognized the stimulative influence of massive monetary and fiscal intervention. These interventions helped propel the Russell Midcap Index which returned +17% for the year. Value investors were largely left behind; however, as mid cap growth stocks soared +36% and mid cap value stocks returned a modest +5%. This represented mid cap growth's largest outperformance since 1999, and if history is any guide, sets the stage for a value comeback. We had a glimpse of what that comeback might look like during the fourth quarter of 2020. Value stocks outperformed, buoyed by the economic ramifications of new COVID-19 vaccines and another round of fiscal stimulus.

In our experience, when a major asset class underperforms for as long as value has, most investors are under-allocated to the asset class. Signs of this neglect include incessant rhetoric about the asset class' demise in the financial media, unusually wide valuation gaps, and the fatigue/frustration asset allocators experience when compelled to repeatedly explain why they have invested in such a lagging strategy. When the economic winds shift, however, the out-of-favor asset class can enjoy a substantial and sustained period of outperformance. Following the tech bubble, for example, mid cap value outperformed mid cap growth by more than 150 percentage points cumulatively over the ensuring seven years. We have learned time and time again, that patience is rewarded for those that stay focused on fundamentals and valuation.

Despite value outperforming growth in the fourth quarter, the Russell Midcap Value Index continues to trade at a larger than normal discount to the Russell Midcap Growth Index. Also, despite the strategy outperforming the value index, the portfolio continues to trade at a larger than normal discount to the Russell Midcap Value. The portfolio's 4Q outperformance narrowed the gap modestly but we anticipate considerably more reversion ahead. To achieve such a large valuation discount, a portfolio must not only be invested in stocks trading at substantial discounts to intrinsic value but must also be very different than the index. The portfolio is both. Its active share is 92, which means that 92% of the portfolio is positioned differently than the Russell Midcap Value.

Financials remain the portfolio's largest sector weight, and banks are the largest industry exposure within financials. Banks have been an unloved industry for years as scars from the financial crisis remain and regulatory uncertainties linger. When it appeared that the market was finally beginning to recognize the industry's strong recurring profitability and its massive de-risking efforts over the past decade, the pandemic caused investors to shun banks regardless of underlying fundamentals or valuations. Among the most important of these de-risking efforts was a substantial increase in capital held on banks' balance sheets. In addition to having excess capital, banks took large provisions throughout the year for potential credit delinquencies that may occur in the future. While these provisions hit 2020 bank earnings, the industry continued to produce compelling pre-provision income, even in the low interest rate environment. The combination of having strong balance sheets, large reserve pools, and ongoing profitability gives us confidence that banks have more than enough capacity to withstand a severe economic downturn much worse than we have experienced thus far. Yet many banks trade at single-digit multiples of normal earnings, which we see as extremely attractive in this market. Further, many banks are in a position to return considerable capital to shareholders. This would be accretive to earnings per share thereby improving valuations even more.

Calendar year 2020 was challenging in a myriad of ways. Looking through our value investor lens, the year tested our patience and conviction. We held steady in our commitment to the principles of value investing and worked as a team to ensure existing investments remained prudent and to find new ideas in an ever-changing environment. We will continue to do both. Our team remains entirely intact, the firm is healthy, and we are optimistic that our clients will be rewarded by our commitment and effort. It was reassuring to observe our time-tested investing style come back into vogue during the most recent quarter and we are optimistic that this reversion could be powerful and lasting. We look forward to the new year with enthusiasm.

ATTRIBUTION – 4Q20

The Hotchkis & Wiley Mid-Cap Value portfolio (gross and net of management fees) outperformed the Russell Midcap Value Index in the fourth quarter of 2020 by a wide margin. The portfolio has long exhibited valuation characteristics at a discount to the Russell Midcap Value, which had been a major stylistic headwind throughout 2020 until reversing in the fourth quarter. Positive stock selection drove about 80% of the outperformance, as the portfolio outperformed the index in 9 of the 10 GICS sectors in which it is invested (there was no exposure to materials). Positive stock selection in financials, energy, consumer discretionary, and industrials were the largest contributors to performance; the overweight exposure to financials and energy were also helpful. Stock selection in healthcare was a modest detractor, along with the lack of exposure to materials. The largest positive contributors to relative performance in the quarter were Cairn Energy, CIT Group, Kosmos Energy, Popular, and Adient; the largest detractors were Vistra, Centene, H&R Block, Navistar, and Equitrans Midstream.

Over the calendar year, the strategy underperformed the Russell Midcap Value Index. The value-focused approach that helped during the fourth quarter hurt over the course of the entire year. Accordingly, the largest contributors/detractors over the year were largely opposite of what occurred during the fourth quarter. The overweight position in energy was the largest detractor in the year.

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LARGEST NEW PURCHASES – 4Q20

Allison Transmission is the established leader in fully automatic commercial truck transmissions and maintains overwhelming share of the market (it invented the product). While there are concerns over pandemic-driven economic weakness, Allison's once overloaded balance sheet has been addressed and the company generates strong free cash flow. Fears that the company will lose profit as the mix of electric and fuel cell drivetrains rises are also overblown. We note that Allison has a growing alternative drivetrain business and the content on those drivelines can be in excess of 3x what it is on a comparable ICE-powered vehicle today. While there are bound to be growing pains from the transition to new driveline technology, Allison is making the required investments to remain relevant and should perform well. In the meantime, it appears clear that internal combustion engines will remain prominent, and Allison is likely to continue gaining share. In other words, under most plausible scenarios, Allison should remain a well-positioned cash generator for the foreseeable future, and we should continue to see the company return cash to shareholders in the form of increasing dividends and opportunistic share repurchases.

Host Hotels is a REIT that owns about 80 hotels primarily in the US. It trades at a discount to the replacement cost of its assets and at an attractive multiple of normal earnings. It has well-positioned hotels and an investment grade balance sheet. Travel has been disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but Host's hotels are in markets that serve both leisure and business travel. Delays in business travel may cause it to underearn temporarily but this should not impair the long-term normal earnings power of the franchise.

KBR's primary business is a provider of outsourced engineering services to governments worldwide. KBR manages civilian programs for agencies like NASA, but most of its business is defense related with programs in engineering, space, and logistics. About one-third of KBR's profits are from its Technology segment which sells high value consulting services and specialty catalysts to customers in chemical, fertilizer, and oil refining markets. KBR's balance sheet is strong. It trades at an attractive multiple of current earnings and we expect double-digit EPS growth as revenue grows with secular tailwinds on its end-markets, margins expand modestly, and the company uses its cash flow to buy back stock.